Freeport

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Freeport

by Maldoror_Chant

Summary

Freeport colony: a notorious den of pirates, smugglers and thieves. Wufei persuades one of its denizens, his one-time ally Duo, to help him catch a killer hiding there. Agent Chang thinks he knows what to expect from this case, from Freeport and from Duo Maxwell. He couldn't be more wrong.

Notes

This fic tales place five years down the road (no EW). The characters are based off of the series more than fanon, so Duo and Wufei have NOT spent that much time together during the war, they never played 'house' for months on end in one of Quatre's mansions.

This copy of Freeport was rewritten back in 2009 to clean up some punctuation, grammar, odd sentences, a few redundancies etc. Nothing major has changed in the plot, but a lot got fixed in the form.

Dedicated to Dacia, as it was originally written for the anniversary of her site "A Little Piece of Gundam Wing"
Chapter 1

"...False security has lulled the madness of this world into a slumber. Wake up! An eye is upon you, staring straight down and keenly through, seeing all that you are and everything that you can never be. Yes, an eye is upon you, an eye ready to blink.

So face forward, with arms wide open and mind reeling. Your future has arrived... are you ready to go?"

--- Powerman 5000

Chang Wufei was quite prepared to admit that he lacked diplomacy.

His friends would regretfully agree with him on this. They each had their own brand of the skill when faced with non-violent confrontation. Sally would cheerfully talk her opponents around, Trowa would reason them into a corner, Quatre would listen and discuss fairly, Heero would-...no, Heero was as devoid of diplomacy as Wufei, but people tended not to argue with him so it didn't stand out as much.

Wufei wondered how his colleagues would handle this upcoming reunion.

He hadn't seen Duo since they were both fifteen-year old terrorists. These would be the first words Wufei had spoken to his one-time ally since they'd said a casual 'Good luck' on MO2 five years ago and gone their separate ways, Wufei turning eventually to the Preventers and Duo disappearing into the worst den of sin in the solar system.

In those circumstances, 'Hi Duo' seemed...insufficient.

The alternative was, 'Maxwell, I'm here on a mission. You will help me or I'll make sure Trowa stops ignoring the petty smuggling operation you run on the side.'

His memories of Duo were distant now. A fiend in a cockpit who enjoyed fighting way too much, an L2 spacer street rat turned war hero under the odd set of circumstances only a civil war could conjure. Wufei had not been particularly surprised to hear that Maxwell had not settled down much in this new peace they enjoyed. No, not surprised at all. But Wufei did remember Duo Maxwell well enough to know that option number two - 'help me or else' - would result in absolutely zero cooperation and a punch in the jaw. Better stick to 'Hi Duo', even if it sounded disingenuous.

"Don't blame me if he kicks you out the door. He hates surprises," Hilde Shreibeker muttered for the third time. Wufei pretended to ignore her once more, but inwardly he was beginning to wonder if Duo would even let him get the 'Hi' out.

The television was on in the background. There was a lit screen everywhere he went these days, people watching it like cows chewing cud. Even the Schreibeker woman was looking at it frequently, as if she needed its bright presence to counter the Preventer's sombre aura. Some slice-of-life garbage was on; a competition between three villages to make the best float for the New Year's peace march. Shreibeker watched these people she would never meet build a useless contraption she would never see and that would not improve her life in any capacity as if she had nothing better to do with her time which, considering the piles of junk outside the window, could not possibly be the
Wufei glanced at his watch. Two hours and counting spent waiting in this room. He wished they had another RV point for Duo than Schreibeker's house.

The documentary ended. Wufei didn't catch which village won the competition and only knew it was finished when Hilde switched to the news broadcast. The headline was President Relena Peacecraft - no great surprise there - opening the latest Peace Park. Somewhere in Europe, Wufei noted; not, say, in the racketeer's paradise of Taiwan, the bombed out warzone around Seattle or on L2.

The ESUN Economic section of the journal elaborated on the employment rate, holding strong and showing another 0.5% increase this month. Wufei stared stonily at the anchorwoman's earrings, swinging like a hypnotist's pendulum. He knew those figures did not include the statistics for regions below the Economic Disaster Line, colonies in transition governments and ex-soldiers still being 'retrained' under the Rehabilitation Act.

The L2 riots were briefly mentioned after ten minutes of news, right after the report about Prince Milliardo's latest Mars project and six pieces of advertisement. The Perfect Woman featured in one of the ads had honey-blond hair and big vacuous eyes. An echo, if not a downright copy, of Relena but without any of her surprisingly strong will and determination. As if the TV execs wanted to water down her image, make her harmless and easily consumable along with the latest brand of cereal or dish soap. But maybe that was his cynicism talking. Watching too much television tended to leave Wufei 'a bit keyed up', according to Trowa's dry observation.

"I'll just go see what my guys are doing out there with that scrap," Hilde said in a tight voice and nearly ran out the door. Wufei realized he'd been scowling at the screen. The same advertisement ran again right on cue. The woman didn't look that much like Relena on second viewing, but it was still annoying.

He took advantage of Schreibeker's absence to switch the TV off, his sanity being more important in his eyes than a minor breach of propriety. He took up her post at the window, standing out of habit in the angle where he couldn't be seen and shot at from outside. Hilde lived on the edge of her scrap yard. A business she'd started up during the war as a front for Duo's terrorist activities, but apparently the woman had taken to trash and kept it thriving during peacetime. It took all sorts.

Speaking of which...

Wufei's one-time ally wasn't being particularly careful, beyond the fact he'd snuck in through the back door where he couldn't be seen from the yard. Wufei heard a faint 'Yo, Hil? You there?' and footsteps heading his way. He had three seconds to turn around and face the door before it opened. Not enough time to decide just how he was going to re-introduce himself.

"Heero, bud, you-...you've got to be fucking kidding me."

"Maxwell."

That worked too. No friendly greeting would have made this any easier.

Duo Maxwell. Same heart-shaped face, same braid. Dressed in the khaki and tan work clothes of a scrap-dealing Sweeper. Wufei felt a touch of surprise at the absence of signature black other than a pair of tight leather gloves. No visible weapons, but he carried himself like he was armed. He hadn't changed all that much.

As Duo took a few steps into the room, Wufei realized belatedly that Duo was no taller than he was,
maybe even a hair shorter. The way he held himself, it was not immediately apparent. Eyes of that unusual shade of blue that Wufei remembered were fixed on him. Duo wasn't smiling.

"Chang Wufei, and all by your lonesome. Tell me Heero's hiding behind the couch ready to jump out shouting 'Surprise!'"

"Do you think that's likely?"

"No, but that's the best outcome at this point."

Wufei had been expecting some hostility. Heero had warned him that Duo would probably be negative from the get-go. It was true, Duo did not like surprises, not unless he was the perpetrator and the surprises were the kind that went boom.

"I know you were expecting Heero for this mission." Wufei made a stab at placating. It came out stiff. He didn't like the way Duo was treating him like the punch line of a joke that wasn't particularly funny. "But Yuy can't make it this time."

"He better be on his deathbed," Duo growled.

"Not quite."

The nature of the tension changed as Duo's eyes widened and his mouth turned down at the corners. With those two words Wufei was no longer an intruder and possible problem; he was one of five people - closer than friends through no particular desire of their own, but linked nonetheless - who was potentially here to give Duo a piece of very bad news.

"Just how bad?" Duo asked.

"He'll be okay," Wufei answered briskly. "He should be out of the hospital in a couple more days."

Duo relaxed a bit and rubbed his chin. "Damn, Chang, you scared me there. I thought the Suicide King had finally managed to get his ticket punched."

"It certainly looked like he was trying." Wufei's own anger at his partner's recklessness was still simmering. They could have both been killed.

"What happened? Did he lose a barehanded fight with a Leo?"

"We were on L2 X953. Have you heard about the riots?"

The expressive eyebrows mocked him. "I live in Freeport, not under a rock."

"The fool jumped from a ten-foot wall right into a knot of rioters - in his Preventer uniform, of course - because he thought he saw some kid being crushed in the press."

"Yeah, sounds like something Heero would do." Duo's gaze drifted as if he was looking back at some memory replaying over Wufei's shoulder.

"Someone got him in the head with a brick. Concussion, hairline fracture, but no lasting damage."

"No, the head was never Heero's weak spot," Duo snickered.

"Then some rioter winged him with a baseball bat. Broke his upper arm."

"And where were you all this time?"
"Cold-cocking the bastard who was aiming at Yuy's back with a shotgun," Wufei bit out.

"Oh, so you jumped down from the wall too." Duo smirked. He didn't look surprised. "What about the kid?"

"Picked herself up, called Heero a 'fucking pig', tried to steal his gun and ran off when I glared at her."

Duo snickered. "Sounds like L2 hasn't changed that much. So he's got concussion."

"And a broken arm."

"Did he try to set the bone himself?"

"No, he waited for the paramedics this time."

"Oh? He's mellowed in his old age."

"I insisted."

"Ahhh."

Some of the initial tension crept back, but the past and the friends that connected them had defused it. That connection would stop Duo from perfunctorily kicking Wufei out the door. It wouldn't stop him from staying 'no' to the mission, though.

"Here." Wufei went back to the couch where he'd left his folder and slipped out the photograph and ID. "Know this man?"

Duo approached on a tangent, holding out his hand. He glanced at the pic for one second and tipped it back to Wufei, holding it carelessly between two fingers. "Nope, never seen him."

Wufei wouldn't have expected him to say 'yes' if the man was his worst enemy, not without some good reason first. "We've code-named him Carver. I want you to take me to Freeport and help me find him."

"Yeah, I was afraid you were gonna say that," Duo said drolly, lacing his hands behind his head in a sort of relaxed shrug of dismissal.

Wufei managed to ignore the tone, but his limited store of patience was already wearing thin. "Let me give you his outline and why we need him."

"Sure, why not." The shrug was still in place as Maxwell wandered towards the window. "Make it good."

"He's a hitman."

Duo snorted. "Make it better."

"Nine victims known to date. Three of those were children," Wufei said, playing what he hoped was his trump card.

Nothing in Duo's stance changed except that his gaze twitched from Wufei to the window, but Wufei felt that he'd managed to engage a bit more of Duo's attention.

"I find it hard to believe a hitman would take out kids. Unless they were witnesses?" Duo asked. His
head was slightly cocked, waiting for the answer.

"We don't know for sure, but two of the victims were killed in their family home along with their parents, even though the children were hiding in their room. Seven and five years of age. The third was twelve, butchered along with his mother while walking home from school."

Wufei slipped crime-scene photographs from the folder and held them out like a baited hook. It went against his instincts to share this much, but Heero had carefully coached him from his hospital bed on what to do and say before Wufei had left to catch his shuttle. Heero had been most insistent; it was crucial that Wufei involve Duo in the details of the crime as much as possible, particularly the bit about the kids. Duo would not take Wufei to Freeport just because they were one-time allies and somewhat connected, or because Wufei could throw Maxwell's ass in jail for a couple of years if he didn't.

Duo's gaze flickered towards the photographs, but he didn't come any closer to examine them, sticking by the window with his hands sunk into the pockets of his Sweeper jacket.

"What makes you think he's in Freeport?"

"We have evidence," Wufei replied shortly. Then he frowned. He'd forgotten something..."Oh, Heero asked me to tell you that he uses some kind of cutting weapon, not a gun." For some reason his friend had been very insistent he mention that.

"A flick blade or something?" Duo sounded incurious. He'd taken up the same position at the window as Wufei had previously, to one side out of sight.

"No, a lot bigger. More like a machete. We don't call him Carver for nothing." Wufei glanced in distaste at the top crime scene photograph before putting them away.

"...Really?"

Wufei looked up. Duo hadn't moved, but his eyes were no longer focused on the scrap yard outside. After a few seconds of silence, he shrugged.

"Sounds like a real bastard. So what's your angle?"

"Angle?"

"Yeah. You and Heero only deal with the highly-flammable political stuff. I grant ya, I wouldn't want this guy dating my sister, but why are the Preventers so keen to nab him that Trowa'll risk sending one of his 'Specials' to Freeport? He's just a hitman."

Wufei kept his eyes on the folder in his hand. He hadn't thought Duo would pick up on that detail, or question him on it. "Most of Carver's known contractors to date have been radical organizations. He's been put in the Class A category because of the information he might have on their networks."

"Sounds a bit slim to me." Duo sounded puzzled and rightfully so. Carver had made it into Class A by only the barest of margins, and there were many other terrorists of greater importance out there.

But Wufei didn't care. This was the case Trowa had given him and the reasons involved were none of Duo's business. This was now Wufei's mission. And for Wufei, a total of nine murders was never going to be something he would think of as negligible.

"I've been asked to retrieve him. Trowa wants you to help me locate him in Freeport. Are you going to be difficult about this?"
He could hear the anger in his voice. That was stupid. It wasn't directed at Duo and he shouldn't antagonize the man needlessly. He'd let Maxwell refuse to take him to Freeport. Then he'd get mad at him.

"Look, Chang, I'd love to oblige - after hauling my hump all the way out here and everything - but you'd not last three minutes in Freeport." Duo leaned against the wall next to the window and gave him a once-over that ended with a bemused shake of the head at the very thought.

"You've taken Heero there and helped him with his missions on four occasions. He's spent nearly two months there at one time. He managed."

"Yeah, but that was Heero. No offence."

Considerable offence taken. Heero was probably the best fighter the human race had produced to date, a one-man army, a soldier to the tip of his deadly fingers, but he was crap at undercover work and Wufei knew it.

"Well Heero can't make it," he ground out. "He's going to be stuck in a cast for at least a couple of weeks and on sick leave for as long as Barton can keep him tied to the bed. And then he has some other matters to deal with." More important cases, and the twice-yearly New Threat To Relena was already over-due; Heero would not want to bury himself in Freeport for a few weeks at this juncture in case he missed it. For some reason every revolutionary organisation seemed persuaded that bumping her off would usher in a new era of something or other. She acted a little like a lightning rod as a consequence. Wufei thought this was actually a fairly good use for her, but none of his colleagues seemed to share his opinion.

"You can't take Heero's place. It just won't work. You and Freeport?" Duo gave out a short bark of laughter as if the very concept was a joke.

"Why not?"

"Why not?" Duo's reaction put that question on par with 'why is space a vacuum'. "Because you'd have to blend into Freeport and follow the code, Chang. You'd have to shut up and behave and do everything I say at the drop of a hat if you even want to stand a ghost of a chance-"

"If that's what it takes."

Duo stopped grinning and examined Wufei as if measuring the extent of the determination behind those curt words.

Wufei held the folder up. "I. Want. Carver. You know me, Maxwell. We fought side by side in pretty desperate circumstances. Did you ever know me to not do what it takes to bring about justice?"

Duo didn't answer right away. Maybe he'd remembered how Wufei had let himself get captured, chained and nearly executed just to get Nataku repaired, and the way he'd continued examining Altron's specs while their air was running out. Wufei had never let even impending death get in the way of his goals.

"I know you're committed, Chang, but that's not enough to wing it in Freeport. You're going to get yourself killed. More importantly," Duo grumbled, "you're going to get me killed."

"Barton has authorized me to offer you ten percent more than your usual fee," Wufei said, trying to hide his distaste.
"He'd have to pay me a hell of a lot more than that to get me to commit suicide, yanno. I happen to believe that my life ain't cheap."

It seems it's still up for sale though, Wufei nearly said, but kept it to himself. Getting snippy wouldn't help, and who was he to talk? At least Maxwell was smart enough to put a consequential price on his life. Five years after the war Wufei was still throwing his away on a regular basis for free, or to be more precise for a yearly salary that made his banker cry into her mocha latte.

"Twenty percent," Duo stated, but he didn't seem to be fully into the negotiation. His eyes kept drifting towards the powder-pink folder Wufei was holding. Interesting, and more in keeping with the Duo Maxwell that Wufei remembered. Never one to resist a challenge or the opportunity to do something dangerous and violent for some good cause or other.

Wufei held the folder up, waving it temptingly. "Ten percent and the knowledge that this guy will end up in jail and never date your sister." Or kill any more children.

"Eighteen percent. I don't have a sister." But at this point Duo had already agreed. The money was merely a way of letting Wufei know how displeased the smuggler was about the circumstances.

"Twelve. ESUN has emergencies left, right and centre, we don't want to throw money away."

"Fifteen. Times are hard for everybody, Chang. And I'll be doing all the work..."

The last wasn't even a mutter, more a movement of the lips, but Wufei caught it nonetheless.

"Fifteen, and you'll get me aboard Freeport and assist me in apprehending Carver?" he asked suspiciously.

"Fifteen and I'll make sure you guys arrest him next time he leaves the colony. Tro won't give me a single cred until then anyway," Duo pointed out.

'I'll make sure'? Wufei opened his mouth to protest, but remembered Trowa's hasty last words before he shoved Wufei onto the shuttle: "Be aware Duo might try to park you into a corner and go find Carver himself. That's not an acceptable risk. Duo is an important resource; he's our entry into Freeport. Don't endanger him or allow him to endanger himself. But," here Trowa had smiled sardonically, "he's not going to like it, so make sure you get him at least halfway to Freeport before being your usual stubborn and confrontational self. Got it?"

"Fifteen percent," Wufei agreed, glowering at the folder.

"Done. I'll spend the bonus on a shrink; I need to get my head examined," Duo muttered, heading towards the hallway leading towards the back of the house. "Come on, let's get you dressed."

"Dressed?" Wufei fumbled the bag he was picking up. He was wearing his usual clothes when he wanted to go incognito into some slum or other.

"Yeah, we don't want you to stand out. Jeans will, in Freeport. And you've worn that jacket with your shoulder holster too much, there's a bit o' bulge at the seam."

Wufei kept his gaze on Duo's back and resisted the temptation to glance down at himself and check. Damn, who was the investigator here?

"S'okay," Duo tossed over his shoulder, "Heero leaves his Freeport clothes here when he's done with a mission."
"Heero's clothes?" Wufei hadn't been sure what to expect once Duo had agreed. Ever since he'd been given the mission he'd been busy reading up on Carver, remembering the little he knew about Freeport and thinking up various threats to get Duo to take him there. He'd not thought much beyond that, he'd just assumed they'd be off the minute Duo had agreed to be his Freeport stoolie. Getting dressed in his best friend's clothes in some strange woman's house had not been part of his mission planning.

"Yeah, Heero's not fond of them, inasmuch as that guy has any preferences at all. He wears them in Freeport out of necessity and leaves 'em here, ready for the next mission." Duo opened a door that led to a sparsely furnished guest bedroom. The air smelled stale. Dead flies decorated the windowsill and scrap yard grime slowly climbed the glass panes on the outside. "You two are 'bout the same build, they should fit you."

"I'm wider in the shoulders than Yuy, and narrower in the waist," Wufei objected without thinking.

Duo had thrown open a closet to the slight smell of mothballs. He'd stuck his head in, but withdrew it to look at Wufei quizzically. "You know this for a fact?"

"We're partners on most of our missions, we frequently get our jackets mixed up."

"That explains the shoulders, but I'm dying to hear how you know about the waist," Duo leered. He was sorting through hangers, but his eyes were on Wufei.

Wufei unclenched his teeth enough to say, "We got our sports bags mixed up once. At the gym." He was being baited.

"Huh-huh. Okay, Mr-not-so-wide-in-the-waist, try these on for size."

Wufei looked at the garments tossed carelessly on the bed. "I've got similar clothes in my bag."

"You have a pair of leather pants? I wouldn't have thought you the type. At all. Unless these are threads you keep in a suitcase in a closet with 'undercover' taped to the handle."

Which hit pretty close to the mark, but Wufei wasn't going to give him the pleasure of admitting it. "I'll get my own clothes out and-"

"Allow me." Duo pounced onto his duffel and dumped it on the bed.

"Maxwell-" But the zip had already flown open, and Wufei had promised Trowa he'd try to cooperate.

"Let me see." Duo's quick fingers rifled through the clothes. Strangely enough he was peering at labels and hems as well as the clothes themselves. "T-shirts...bought by the dozen at the same shop Heero gets his, you guys are so predictable. These are okay, they're cheap and they're everywhere, even in Freeport."

Wufei looked up from the pile of his t-shirts dumped on the thin bedcover. Heero's last mission on Freeport had been ten months ago, he was surprised Duo remembered his t-shirt brand.

"Jeans, though, no. Not practical or warm enough, nobody wears 'em on Freeport."

Warm enough?

"Same for the leathers. Nice pair by the way. But you've not worn them enough and it shows. They're also more expensive than your cover story explains, and you'd freeze your tail off. Oh, and
this definitely stays here." The last was said as Duo reached into the bag and pulled out Wufei's spare Browning.

"Can't you smuggle it in past the blockade?" Wufei queried, voice heavy with irony.

"The blockade ain't the problem and no, you don't bring guns into Freeport." Duo put the Browning on the bedside table and started packing the rejected clothes back in Wufei's bag. "Did you happen to bring a sword?"

Wufei had his mouth open to challenge Duo's assertion that a clever smuggler such as Maxwell couldn't get a small Browning past customs. It stayed open for a bit. "...A sword?"

"Yeah. You had one during the war, didja keep it?"

Of course he'd kept it. And what's more he took it with him wherever he went to train his forms in his spare time. At least that's what he told people it was for, and the three friends who knew about its sentimental value just nodded and said 'sure'.

"I left it at the shuttleport, in their business safe. It's valuable, to me at least. I don't want it stolen. Why."

"I give it the same odds of getting stolen at the shuttleport as it does in Freeport. This is L2 after all. No matter, here." Duo reached into the cupboard and pulled out a short sword in a plain black scabbard. He tossed it at Wufei who caught it and unsheathed it with a practiced movement.

"Wakizashi," he said, tilting the blade to the grey light from the grimy window. "Heero's?"

"Kinda. I got it for him, but he leaves it here with the rest of his Freeport stuff. You can use that. At least you know how to use a blade, that's a plus."

"You mean..." The full import of the conversation was dawning on Wufei. "You mean I might actually have to use a sword on Freeport?"

"Yup. Well, no, hopefully not, but if we get into a fight-"

"People fight with swords?!!"

Duo looked at him steadily, eyes searching. "Wufei...just how much do you know about Freeport?"

Wufei let his wrist go soft, feeling the sword's balance. "Not much," he admitted shortly. "I was only handed this mission yesterday. I didn't have much time to prepare for it. I heard of the weapons ban the blockade imposes, of course. It was there even during the Alliance. I assumed people violated it all the time, though." Smugglers such as Duo, for example. "But I should hope, if you are going to have me fight with a sword, that the opposition will not be armed with a gun?"

"Nope, no guns."

"If that's the case..." Wufei lifted the sword's tip, then flipped the cutting edge to one side in a quick, deadly swipe. "If that's the case, we'll take a detour by the shuttleport's offices to get my sword before we leave. This one is not all that good." He'd just take his sword everywhere with him and not lose sight of it for a minute.

"Well sor-reee it's not up to your standards, Chang. It was the best I could find. Heero never complained."
"That's because Heero doesn't cut with a sword, he bludgeons," Wufei sniffed. "Even his foil technique relies mainly on his unnatural speed and strength. If you gave Heero a crowbar, he'd manage just as well."

Duo's eyebrows twitched up as he smiled archly. "Huh. You ever wonder what Heero says about you?"

"I know what he says about me, he says it to my face and I return the favor."

"You two share such a beautiful friendship." But the irony sounded put on, as if Duo was perfectly aware of the real depths of the two Preventers' comradeship when all but two of their co-workers thought Wufei and Heero got along about as well as fire and ice. Wufei sheathed the sword and looked at Duo obliquely while the latter fished a few more things from the cupboard. Just what had Heero told Maxwell? How close were these two?

Wufei put the sword in a corner, imagining Heero's hands on the hilt. He and Heero had a lot of unspoken rules to their friendship, one of which was they didn't meddle in each other's relationships. So Wufei wasn't sure how close Heero and Duo were. One of the best Preventers in the force paired with a conman and a smuggler? You could make several cheap and cheesy movies out of that one. It seemed farfetched to say the least, but Wufei couldn't help but wonder if that wasn't the reason Heero had agreed to dive time and again back into Freeport, or take Duo with him as an 'advisor' when cornering some gun runners in the Inner Satellites. There had always appeared to be some connection between the two during the war, the kind that could have grown into more, assuming Duo swung that way...well, none of Wufei's business.

"If you'd rather use your own slicer, we can pick it up before we head to Freeport. Though you won't have to fight," Duo added, seeming very sure of that fact. Wufei just nodded tightly and said nothing as he watched the smuggler add a pair of utilitarian grey boxers to the clothes he'd selected. Wonderful. He wasn't sure how close Yuy and Maxwell were, but having Duo choose his underwear was already more intimate than Wufei wanted to get.

Duo gave him and then the clothes a pointed look. Wufei looked back, waiting. Duo turned away, but it was only to move as far as the cupboard and lean against it, arms crossed over his chest, eyes on Wufei and a smirk hanging around the corner of his mouth like a thrown gauntlet. Great, looked like Maxwell hadn't grown up one bit. Very well. If Duo wanted to look, then let him get an eyeful.

No hiss or exclamation when Wufei stripped off his shirt, but as he pulled his head free of the cloth he saw Duo's gaze had fixed itself on the scars. The smirk had disappeared. Wufei was unbuckling his pants before Duo spoke.

"Do I even want to see the other guy?"

"The other guy is dead." He did not need to ask what Duo was referring to.

"Of course. What did he use, a flame-thrower?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact. Napalm."

Wufei stopped stripping to run an impartial hand down the planes of his chest. To all appearances, a careless God had flayed off long stretches of skin from Wufei's left side and upper arm, replacing it with a smooth, hairless simulacrum. Whorls and dips like divine fingerprints were visible at the edges where He'd tamped it down onto Wufei's body. Scarred remains of a nipple drew a faint brown line against the paler skin.
"Napalm." Duo's gaze was clinical as it went over the burns with the eyes of a soldier. "Then you were bloody lucky, Chang."

"No, I was careless. I didn't dive away fast enough and got splashed. Fortunately for me, Heero was present."

"Heero- ah, right, so that's where he got those burns on his palms and forearms."

"He didn't tell you?" Wufei tried to fit that piece of information into his Yuy-Maxwell theory, ignoring by force of habit the prickle of deadened nerves his hand brushed as he slid down his pants. The damage dribbled down his left hip in the savage pink keloid scarring of a second-degree burn. Not as bad as the left side of his chest where the epidermis had been completely scorched away in places. The lighter burns on his side and arm had hurt, agony like a blunt saw taking him apart where the nerves had been attacked; he'd barely felt a thing where they'd been killed outright by the handful of chemical on his chest, spread across the skin as he desperately rolled to put out the fire. The smell...it still gave him nightmares, the smell of his own flesh cooking.

Heero had tried to help. Wufei remembered cursing him like a madman. It'd felt like his friend was ripping Wufei's skin off with his fingernails. Heero's matching second degree burns on hands and arms were a silent reproof of Wufei's carelessness. Yuy had risked his limbs to wipe the sticky, burning jelly off of his partner's body before smothering him in a fire blanket. It had taken some time to come to terms with that debt. A few months, until it was his turn to save Heero's life again. Trowa made a point of keeping a running score in the wry hope they'd eventually remember he couldn't afford to lose either of them.

"No, Heero never did tell me where he got those scars. Just showed up with them on one of our undercover gigs few years ago. I bugged him of course, so he said he'd been in an accident, but he never gave me any details." Duo shrugged. The movement shoved him away from the dresser. He walked slowly towards Wufei, examining the burns with nothing more apparent than slight curiosity.

"Nice grafts. Very nice."

Wufei glanced down. He'd not thought of them as being nice or otherwise. He'd refused the cosmetic surgery that would have reduced the appearance of scarring. None of the damage impaired his movements - he'd been lucky with that, too - and he'd already wasted two months of his time in and out of hospital, he wasn't going to waste more over something as trivial as appearances.

He slipped down his briefs, tossed them into his pile of clothes and went to pick up the boxers Duo had laid out.

"Must have hurt like a bitch." The casual sympathy changed to a leer when Duo added, "But I see the Chang family jewels didn't come to any harm."

Wufei gave him the look he normally reserved for rats, bureaucrats and other vermin, but he didn't hurry his movements to draw on the boxers. This whole thing, watching him undress, the jab...Duo was trying to fluster him, press him, gain some sort of advantage over him. Wufei didn't know why, or if there was even a reason, but he was damned if he was going to let it happen.

"When did this go down?" Duo asked, settling back against the dresser. His eyes were going over the rest of Wufei's body, maybe checking for other injuries he'd not heard about. He must have noticed the stitches on Wufei's back, the bruises, the obvious impact of a bullet against a flak jacket on his belly, all recent. He made no comment.

"Three years ago. Nearly two years after the Last War."
"Note the irony. Are there a lotta lunatics totting napalm around out there?"

"Less," was all Wufei said. Duo's status was that of an informant and strictly no security level as far as Wufei was concerned. He slipped on the pants. The leather was coarser than his own, tougher and quilted inside; very warm and quite comfortable, though predictably enough a bit too large at the waist. He cinched in the belt and judged them acceptable. The leather didn't creak as he moved. They were well-worn.

The long-sleeved t-shirt was also warm, though the cloth was rough and cheap, a rasp against his skin and a distant prickle against the scarring. Wufei moved his arms and shoulders around, trying to tame the feeling and get the fibers settled down against his skin. He looked up to find the jacket held out to him. Duo's pinkies were standing straight out, the parody of a refined gesture a contrast to the bulky jacket that looked like something a less reputable biker would wear. Wufei slipped his arms through the sleeves without bothering to comment. Duo settled it over his shoulders with a couple of pats. It was surprisingly heavy and also well worn, some kind of tough polyester ribbed with rubber edges at shoulders and elbows. Wufei relaxed his arms and then his fist shot out, giving the air a couple of punches. It wasn't too tight over the shoulders, not enough to hamper his movements anyway.

"Not too bad," he grumbled.

"Hmmm." Duo was back at the bed, stuffing Wufei's t-shirts and other articles of clothing from the cupboard into a stained and beaten knapsack. Wufei caught a swift glance from beneath the thick bangs. The gaze was gauging. It occurred to Wufei that Duo's baiting might have been to goad him into a reaction that would prove he couldn't shut up and take a small piece of humiliation. The Preventer felt a flash of annoyance, but he kept it from showing. The last time he saw you, you were a child, he reminded himself; a fifteen-year-old warrior with too much pride and arrogance.

Wufei had kept the pride and the arrogance, but now they were founded on his true self; they came from knowing he was doing something essential, that he was protecting what he'd killed for in the past. He did what had to be done, said what had to be said, however much that inconvenienced some people or himself for that matter. If Duo didn't realize that, then that space-jockey didn't remember Wufei all that well either.
Chapter 2

If travel is searching
And home has been found
I'm not stopping

I'm going hunting
I'm the hunter
I'll bring back the goods
But I don't know when

I thought I could organize freedom
How Scandinavian of me
You sussed it out, didn't you?
Yeah!

You could smell it
So you left me on my own
To complete the mission
Now I'm leaving it all behind

I'm going hunting
I'm the hunter, I'm the hunter
--- Bjork, 'Hunter' 

A glance out the L2 dock's viewport and Wufei spotted their ride, a small shuttle showing signs of a lot of post-manufacture tinkering. It wasn't very pretty, but Wufei was ready to bet it was fast. It was Duo's own property, bought after the war with funds which it would be wise not to examine too closely. Wufei had never begrudged Duo the ship; the L2 native had a passion for space, and Duo deserved some kind of reward for the war which he'd helped to win. It was what he chose to do with his wicked little ship that Wufei disapproved of, such as smuggling contraband to colonies still under martial law, transferring stolen goods from other clusters to wherever they would be fenced, occasionally getting outlaws past check points in space...As far as Wufei knew - he was trusting Trowa's information on this - Duo had never run guns or participated in anything remotely political himself. Until he crossed that line, he was more useful to them free and helping them to corner more serious threats to peace than a small-time conman and crook could represent.

There was a funny smell in the air as they breached the airlock seal and entered the ship, a chemical tang that Wufei couldn't identify as either ship fuel or plastic. It permeated the blanket on the small bunk, the seat covers, the change of clothes in the cubby-hole into which Duo casually tossed his jacket in passing. The spare clothes were black, Wufei noted with a flicker of recognition.

He navigated his way around a few boxes that had overflowed from the cargo hold and had been fastened by steel nets to various points of the cabin. Hopefully there was nothing in there that a Preventer should be worrying about. Probably not. Duo was flying them into Freeport via the legal route, which meant he was going to have to cross the blockade.

Duo moved with the coiled energy Wufei remembered, hopping over the armrest to land lightly in the pilot's chair, hands already on the console. Wufei sat down in the co-pilot's seat with more dignity. He stayed out of Duo's way while the latter went through pre-flight checks; if Duo needed
his help, he'd ask, but Wufei doubted it would be either required or wanted. Duo had always been extremely twitchy about people meddling with his 'buddy' Deathscythe, even Howard's engineers on Peaceillion during the war had been no exception. The Gundams had been sent on their Viking funeral to the sun years ago and this ship was now Duo's pride and joy. The fact he'd called it 'Scythe' was a good indication he'd feel just as protective towards it. Wufei kept his hands away from the console and composed himself to wait until they were on their way.

"Freeport, here we come," said Duo, edging the ship out of docking. As the clipper lost the colony's spin, Wufei felt the familiar full-body lift of zero G tug at him. He glanced out the viewport, then at the radar readout. The clipper was heading towards the space lane furthest from the L2 colony where Schreibeker lived.

Freeport was, in theory, part of the L2 colony cluster, being set at that Lagrange point, but both geographically and politically this wasn't the case. Wufei glanced at his watch. It would take nearly two hours to reach their destination, one of the furthest flung colonies of the Space Sphere bar the Mars project and a few mining satellites.

Duo cleared them of the colony's traffic and double-checked his flight plan, tanks and engine turnover with the cheerful conscientiousness Wufei remembered. The complete focus he gave to his task afforded Wufei the opportunity to discreetly examine his one-time ally.

Neither of them had gained much more than half-a-dozen inches in height; colony stock, the both of them. Wufei had his Asian heritage to add to that, while Duo...with Duo it could be the result of any number of genetic or environmental factors. Wufei didn't know much about Maxwell's past, but he remembered Heero mentioning one of the L2 slums, and Duo himself had told him once he was an orphan since he was a baby. Didn't take much imagination to figure out in what circumstances he'd grown up. Wufei had seen enough victims of that kind of upbringing in the past five years to realize how very sheltered his own childhood had been despite his intense martial training.

Duo's body had grown in other ways. He'd gained some wiry muscles, his chest and shoulders were broader. Combined with his relative lack of height, it made him look considerably more...solid than when they were children. But he moved with fluid grace and precision as he double-checked engine output and life support, reached up to test the fuel jettison switches and then across to prod the O2 monitor which appeared to be vacillating. Wufei wondered if Duo still kept to a soldier's physical regimen these days.

"It's just the detector," Duo said over his shoulder as he scowled at the O2 monitor. "I've already triple-checked the air on my way out. Gotta change it. Oy, something else to take care of." The end of the sentence curled up into a grumble. His voice hadn't deepened much. It had been nearly mature five years ago already. Wufei remembered that slightly sardonic drawl that told the world to not take it seriously, unless it wanted Duo to start taking it seriously too in which case blood would be spilled. Duo had picked up twangs of an odd accent since the war. A couple of times during take-off he'd used space lingo Wufei wasn't familiar with, probably local to Freeport.

The subject's face had become leaner with age, the features bolder. Still very distinctive with a wide mouth, upturned nose and big eyes of an odd blue. The braid drifted across his back as he bent to check another dial. His hair was darker now, probably due to lack of sunshine, artificial or otherwise, and the braid was a couple of inches shorter. His bangs were still thick and wild. Wufei's fingers automatically ran over his own hair caught in its neat, tight pony-tail.

They eventually cleared colony traffic and Scythe plowed space towards its destination. The only other ships on scope displayed Sweeper codes on the FOF. Duo entered a few commands into the onboard computer, the leather of his gloves whispering over the plastic. He'd not taken them off.
Wufei watched the fingers flying over the keys, picking up a detail he'd not noted before. Oh...how did that happen...? He didn't ask, though. Duo had certainly felt no compunction about grilling him over his burns - Wufei's features twisted into a self-directed scowl at the unintentional pun - but Wufei disliked giving the impression of the same puerile nosiness. He'd ask later if the opportunity presented itself.

"Right, we're in the clear, auto-pilot's set and we're well on our way. Hand over the file." Duo snapped his fingers at Wufei, the sound muffled by the gloves.

Wufei simmered internally but dug out the file from the knapsack he'd slipped into a holding net near his chair. Duo leaned over against his harness and tugged at it. Wufei had to force his fingers to unclench. Damn it, this wasn't highly classified information but still...Wufei reminded himself that Trowa had ordered him to cooperate, and he let go of the file before it could turn into a tug of war.

Duo affected not to notice his reluctance and settled back into his chair, feet propped against the flight console. He flicked through the folder appraisingly, then he took another longer look at Carver's picture, known itinerary and what specs they had on him.

"Looks like a right bruiser. 6'3" huh?" he finally said, coming back to the cover page after ten minutes of perusal.

"That's our best estimate. He's very good, rarely gets caught on camera and only at a distance. Some of those men he's seen with in those pictures are people we've arrested. Most of them are radicals, terrorists, rioters. They couldn't tell us much about him, though. Carver only collaborated with them when he absolutely had to, to gather information on his targets or to create a diversion. It seems he is hired by the heads of the resistance cells he's working for and sent to do his job with very little help or interference from the small fry."

"Christ, he sure believes in being thorough." Duo commented laconically as another photograph drifted, weightless, above the console with the rest of the information he'd read and discarded. Wufei remembered that one. Second victim, male, still a John Doe to date. The oblique cut had removed part of the victim's brain case and one eye, leaving the sinuses and other internal areas of the head barely crushed and exposed like an anatomy chart gone haywire. A very sharp machete, forensics had thought necessary to add to their report...

"You don't know much about this guy." Duo's eyebrows were twitching towards his hairline as he read the profile, what there was of it. "You don't even have a clue about his politics?"

"None whatsoever. He probably has no definite affiliations. He's a paid hitman." Wufei didn't hide his disgust.

"Yeah, that's a given, but usually these guys are still politicos even if they get paid for their hits. It's weird this guy's worked for different revolutionary branches, a couple of which are known for not gettin' along too well. But all his victims and supposed contractors had something to do with resistance movements, so I can't believe this guy doesn't give a shit about politics."

"All the victims and contractors we know about," Wufei stressed, crossing his arms over his chest.

"What do you mean?"

"I found a couple of cases which looked familiar. Strong indications of his MO. No real proof though. The victims were figures in the mob. Mixed up with high financial fraud."

"...That's an interesting combo. Why's this not in the file?"
"It's my personal theory. I happened to make the link, but they- the Preventers are more concerned with the political threat that Carver represents."

"Yeah," said Duo with a mirthless grin, "what does it matter if a couple of shysters and their kids get cut up, right?"

"It matters," said Wufei, staring at a blinking light on the console.

There was silence from the other chair; not even the gentle whisper of pages turning. Wufei glanced up after a few seconds. Duo's gaze twitched to the folder's contents again. Wufei thought he'd caught an intrigued look aimed his way before the folder had come up like a barrier.

Duo continued to read through analyses and rap sheets, as focused as when he used to review the schematics for his killing machine during the war. Wufei wasn't surprised at the amount of attention a mere informant was paying to the case. It was pretty damn obvious by now, from the lack of details Duo was giving him about his 'cover story' and what to expect on Freeport, that Duo was going to ditch Wufei somewhere safe and try to do most of the work himself. Wufei had nothing against Maxwell earning the obscene amount of money they were paying him for his 'jobs' in Freeport, but Trowa's instructions had been explicit. Besides, Wufei's pride and stubbornness would not allow him to let a layman do a lawman's job. He glanced at his watch. They'd been traveling for an hour, which would put them thirty minutes away from the blockade. Trowa had probably not meant his instructions 'get halfway to Freeport before being stubborn and confrontational' literally, but Wufei took perverse satisfaction in carrying out his more irritating orders as accurately as possible, especially when that would rub someone the wrong way.

"Did that give you any leads?" he asked the silent pilot still bent over the folder. "It won't be easy to find Carver in Freeport if we have no clue where to start looking. How many inhabitants? Thirty thousand? Forty?"

"Eighty thousand dockers, six to eight thousand migrants, nearly that many outtatowners, thirty thousand Sweepers and miners," Duo said, most of his concentration on the folder's contents.

Wufei blinked. "That's...a hundred and thirty thousand residents?" There was no way a colony of that class could support even half that number.

"No, a hundred and thirty thousand citizens," Duo corrected, examining a transcript while thoughtfully drawing the seam of his glove's index finger against his lower lip. "Sweepers and miners rarely land for any length of time."

"Sweepers are, er-..."

"Citizens of Freeport, yeah."

Wonderful. Wufei wondered if ESUN was aware it had thirty thousand potential vagrants and pirates in space. Most Sweepers he knew dabbled in smuggling, and hell, he was hardly in a position to complain about it after they'd sold him contraband ammo and suit parts during the war, but the idea that they...'belonged' to the den of pirates that was Freeport was rather unsettling, considering their numbers.

"What are migrants and atta-...whatever you said?"

"Never mind. Just Freeport stuff." Duo cocked his head and lifted a piece of paper. "Heero wrote this bit, didn't he. The surveillance summary of possible exit methods this Carver fella used to get off L2-X953 once the riots went amber."
Amber? What was that supposed to mean? Wufei dismissed the unasked question and glanced over the rim of the folder. "Yes, Heero wrote that up. The typos are due to the painkillers we slipped him at the time."

"I gathered. He knows what I need, though, what to look for. I trained him well," Duo added proudly. Wufei managed not to bridle on Heero's behalf.

"So, what do you make of it? Is there any information you can use?"

"Some," Duo answered evasively. "Right, Wu, let's set the rules. Trowa did tell you about the rules, right?"

"Yes. I'm to follow your advice-"

"That's 'obey my orders', bud."

"Yes, yes," Wufei muttered. A Preventer at the beck and call of a stool pigeon. May his ancestors be busy paying homage to the Celestial Throne and not watching what their last descendant was going to be put through.

"Now, you know we can't arrest the bugger on Freeport, right?"

"I know," Wufei ground out. "I am well acquainted with the complete lack of the rule of law in that colony. You're to assist me in finding out what we can about Carver, who his contacts are, how he gets in and out of Freeport despite the blockade and hopefully where he will be going next. Then I'll pick him up next time he lands on one of the colonies. Heero has given me an outline of how you two operate on Freeport."

"Right. Just keep that in mind. In fact, delete the words 'arrest', 'rule of law', and 'Preventer' from your vocabulary. If you can," Duo added a bit sardonically. "They'll only get you up to the collar in recyc. In deep shit, I mean."

"I have been on undercover ops before, Maxwell."

"Yeah, but none like this one, I can guarantee."

"What's my cover story?" Wufei asked with heavy patience.

"You're a guy who hangs around with me." Duo released his harness, drifted to one side and started rooting around in a loose cloth bag that was tied to a handle on one side of the cockpit. "Here, I got something you need to put on. You'll be in my room most of the time, you won't have to do much. The cover story will explain why you don't have to talk with anybody, and I really mean anybody. Nobody will ask you any questions, even when you go out to take a piss. You'll be invisible. So you can-"

"No."

Duo stopped his rummaging and turned to face Wufei, eyes as hard as the grin on his face. "Sorry, what was that you just said?"

"I'm not staying hidden while you chase down Carver. Trowa told me that you might want to take this route and he's informed me that this is not acceptable. Carver is my responsibility, and we do not want to risk your position as our informant in Freeport."

"Wow, Barton's all heart."
"He doesn't want you to get killed either," Wufei added, realizing how cold that had sounded. Of course this was Trowa they were talking about; he cared a lot, but there was a lot of chilly, empty space to get through before you reached that bit of his personality and realized how warm and fiercely protective it could be. He kept it well hidden; that was his job.

"You could have fooled me," Duo sneered. "'Cause if he ordered you to stick to my ass, he just signed my death warrant."

"What do you mean?" Wufei asked, temper slowly building. "Don't underestimate me, Maxwell, I'm a proficient-"

"You're a fucking liability is what you are, Chang. Don't even joke about following me around. Sure, it'll be hella risky for me to run around Freeport without backup for the kinda info I need to get, but hauling you around-" Duo interrupted himself with a burst of humorless laughter.

"Heero said he follows you everywhere you go," Wufei countered.

"Yeah, but that's Heero." Duo had drifted back to his seat, bracing himself in with a foot against the console, expression stubborn.

"I can do everything Yuy can."

"No, you can't," Duo shot back with a note of triumph, "because one thing Heero's good at is taking orders, and you just refused your first one."

"I can do everything Heero can," Wufei answered with steel in his voice, "as long as you treat us the same way. If you'd ordered Heero to stay back and hide while you went solo, putting the mission at risk, he would have given you the same answer I did in considerably shorter terms."

"Mission-shmission," snapped Duo. "This is my fucking life we're talkin' about. You're going to get me killed! Or you'll screw up so badly I'll lose my rep."

Wufei's eyebrows twitched. Reputation? What kind of reputation could he possibly endanger in a hive of scum and villainy?

"I will not screw up, Maxwell. Trowa has ordered me not to endanger your position in Freeport."

"Oh. Oh, that makes me feel so much better. If Trowa ordered you to fly, would you start flapping your arms about and-"

"If you tell me what to say and do, then I'll do it!" Wufei barked, his legendary temper fighting against his self-discipline and Trowa's orders.

"I very much doubt that. You're too...Oy, don't even know how to say it, but fuck, if I'd run out of Gundanium plating during the war, I'd have bolted you onto 'Scythe instead. Now I'm sure that's admirable when you're guarding the palace and bein' all authority and law n' order and such, in Freeport you'll-"

Wufei's released harness hissed back and his fist hammered down on the console inches away from Duo's arm as he lunged out of his chair. Duo reacted instantly, but he was caught against the seat. He recoiled against it, eyes dangerous like a rat in a corner.

"You tell me what to do and I'll do it," Wufei said in a tone of voice even Heero never argued with. Duo didn't look impressed, but at least he was listening now.
The next words came out of the heart of Wufei's conviction, the kind that would see Carver in jail if it cost Wufei his life. "I give you my word that I will not endanger your reputation on Freeport." Whatever that was. "I will do what you tell me to as long as you don't try to shunt me out of the way. I will help you find Carver. And remember this, Maxwell: you are risking your reputation, maybe your life. But my mission and my own life are also on the line, as well as our future missions in Freeport and the lives of Carver's next victims if I don't catch him. All that is not something I would stake if I did not think I could succeed. I've been through the fire myself, Maxwell. You would do well to keep that in mind."

Duo's eyes had twitched towards Wufei's chest at the mention of 'fire'; they were now tracing his features millimeter by millimeter, as if he could weigh and measure a man's determination that way.

"I don't think you know what you're getting yourself into, Preventer. This ain't Luxemburg, yanno."

"I know. Hell, Maxwell, I'm never in Luxemburg." And that was better for all concerned. "Most places I work in are no better than Freeport."

"If you knew anything about Freeport, you wouldn't be so sure," Duo muttered, sounding mulish, but the previous stubbornness had given way to a calculating look. Or at least Wufei hoped he was reading that right. Duo's features were wonderfully mobile and expressive, but Wufei knew from years back already that Maxwell could hide his feelings behind that face as well as Heero could when he wanted to. A good face for a poker player, or a smuggler; for someone who gambled his life with a wicked smile and a pair of loaded dice. Wufei was actually surprised that Duo was being so cautious. He'd have thought that adrenaline junky wouldn't mind the challenge of oiling Wufei past pirates and raider gangs with his smooth tongue and easy wit.

Finally Duo shrugged. It was a marvelously expressive gesture. It made sure Wufei realized that this was in no way a surrender, and yeah, Duo still wasn't impressed, thank you. "Okay. Tell ya what. I'm ready to bet Heero never actually told you what he does in Freeport. Right?"

"No, he doesn't talk about it much." The subject of Freeport always seemed to irritate Heero somehow.

"Allow me then. I'll give you the download. And at the end I want you to give me your word again that you think you can do this. That you won't screw up so badly it'll get us both recycked. Killed, I mean. You up?"

"That sounds fair." Wufei settled back down in the co-pilot's seat with a push against the flight console.

"Right. First off..." Duo reached back for the cloth bag and drew something out. "First off, you got to put this on."

Wufei looked at the thin black strip floating before his face, then at Duo's grin which could only be described as evil. He took the thing from Duo's hands and examined it. A strip of thick leather with a buckle like a tiny belt.

"Where do I-"

"It's a collar," purred Duo.

Wufei managed to keep his expression neutral with considerable effort. At this point he was wondering what the hell was his cover story exactly, but he pressed his lips shut against the question. Duo was just waiting to pounce on that one as a sign of reluctance. So instead he put the leather at
his throat and fumbled the buckle without a word. The jacket Duo had given him had a high, straight collar, but even that wouldn't hide this little piece of humiliation. Wufei wasn't going to dwell on it though. He'd done things before in the pursuit of his investigations, his justice, he'd rubbed shoulders with types that he'd sooner exterminate than talk to...Oh, he'd learned some patience in the past few years, when it came to his mission at least (it was when something or someone obstructed justice that he was still, as Une so elegantly put it, 'difficult').

"Is that all?" Wufei asked sarcastically. There was something of the challenge with which Duo had watched him undress earlier in his next words. "Am I supposed to call you Master as well?"

Duo's gaze darted up from where Wufei was synching in the collar, his eyebrows shot up and for an instant Wufei thought he'd managed to catch the joker at his own game. Then Duo burst into laughter.

"Master? Christ, you really don't know much about where you're going! Yeah, call me Master, Chang, if you want to end up lynched to a lamppost. No, just call me Duo."

"So what's my cover story? Am I your slave?"

"Sweet baby Jesus, no, Chang!" Duo rubbed his face vigorously. "What are you, some sorta closet bondage freak or something?"

Wufei didn't answer, but his gaze must have informed Duo that the latter would be swallowing more of Wufei's sword than he could stomach if he ever made such allegations about Wufei's personal life again.

"Tighten it a bit, it's hanging like a bloody necklace," said Duo with a smile that made Wufei want to break something, possibly the mocker's remaining fingers. He didn't bother to hide his scowl, but turned obediently in his chair when Duo boosted himself forward and reached for the buckle. "This ain't anything as kinky as you seem to think. You're gonna be my Blade. The collar just signals this. It's worn so everyone can see it easily." Duo pulled the collar in at least two notches, ignoring Wufei's noise of protest. "This ain't anything as kinky as you seem to think. You're gonna be my Blade. The collar just signals this. It's worn so everyone can see it easily." Duo pulled the collar in at least two notches, ignoring Wufei's noise of protest. "It used to be a headband originally, or a cap, but some of the citizens are on the hairy side, and a hat can get lost in a fight. If someone calls you a Blackcap, well, it's the same thing as a Blade. They might also call you a Guard, or a Hound, though that last ain't really polite, like. And talking of hairy-" Duo's hands darted up.

"Hey!" Wufei tried to grab Duo's fingers but the man was as quick as a thieving cat. Duo grinned triumphantly at the hair band he'd stolen. Wufei's hair, released in a savage pull that smarted against his scalp, floated around his face.

"Here, this'll make you blend in more. Huh. I never realized..." Duo cocked his head to one side and looked at Wufei thoughtfully. "I've never seen you with your hair down before."

"For a reason, Maxwell. I can't fight with it in my face," Wufei growled, trying to gather it back. It was about as controllable as spun silk once it was out of its hair band, it was surging around his face and neck like a live thing under the lack of gravity.

"You get used to it," Duo informed him coolly, ruffling his own bangs. "If not, we'll think of something, but that 'do made you look too clean cut. Might as well have the same crew as those Preventer poster boys they got on display at ESUN." The hair fastener got propelled into the disposal unit seven feet away with superb precision despite null-G conditions.

Caught between shoving back his hair and tugging at the collar now pressing into his throat, Wufei had to wonder if all this was really necessary or if Maxwell was just being a pest. Blinded by fine
black strands and half strangled by a strip of leather, this was going to be a fine way to fight. He was willing to grant Maxwell the collar, it'd been ready for use and was undoubtedly part of this sordid cover story he was going to adopt, but the hair...When it had been badly singed three years ago during the napalm incident, he'd thought of shaving it off and keeping it that way; done and dusted for good. Sally, Lance, Trowa, Quatre and even Heero and Une had mounted a campaign of attrition to get him to change his mind before he could get out of the hospital and head towards the nearest barber shop. He rather wished he'd not let them win at this point.

"So my cover story is that I'm some long-haired, collared thug and you're my boss."

"No, don't call me boss," Duo cut in sharply. "And you're not a thug either, you're my Blade."

"Semantics aside, that still makes me some kind of enforcer by the sound of it," Wufei said, turning his head and testing how much the constriction around his neck was going to hamper his breathing in a fight. "Or did I bring my sword because your colony ran out of cutlery?"

"Oh man, no- look, yeah, you're my enforcer in a way, sure, but don't call me boss."

"Since I don't see you wearing a collar, I'd say you're my employer whatever I call you."

"Agh! Jesus, Mary and Joseph!" Duo exclaimed, waving his hands towards the viewport as if those notables had appeared on the nose of his shuttle like hood ornaments. "This guy's gonna get me lynched!"

"Okay, okay, you're not my boss." This must be like those triads in what was left of Taiwan and Bangladesh after both natural disasters and the Alliance had pounded anything sane out of those two torn countries. There was a lot of show in those gangs about calling each other 'brother'. Of course, Wufei reflected acidly, there was always an 'older brother' somewhere, and you obeyed his orders blindly or he nailed your feet to the floor and then made you watch as he murdered your mother. Wufei was very familiar with this setup and the strange rigid rules that bound them; he'd arrested quite a few 'older brothers' in his time. They tended to adopt gun running as a way of supporting their extended and murderous family.

"Calibrate your audio circuits, Chang." Duo leaned towards him with steely patience in every line of his body. "This is important. Hopefully you'll never be questioned on this, but this is more than knowledge, it's attitude. You gotta have it or we won't make it five feet past the sniffers."

"The what?"

"Save the questions for later. We've not got a tenth of the time needed to teach you how to act correctly - hell, we'd need three months for that. I hope you're a damn sight better at improvisation than Heero is, 'cause at least Heero knew this stuff. Right. A Blade and his Handler aren't just a thug and his boss. It's more like blood brothers. It's more like- put it this way, when I'm asked why you're with me, I'll tell them about how I saved your ass during the war and how you saved mine. That's the kind of bond between us. Okay?"

"Oh." That didn't sound too bad. Fairly honorable, in a way. He wasn't sure where the collar came into this, but-

"But there's a hella imposition here," Duo continued. "This is not something easy. For starters, you can't speak to anybody. And this is crucial, Wufei. This is like...a signature. It's a symbol. We're kinda big on those in Freeport. You can't talk to nobody. Not to suspects, not to someone who asks you questions, not to the granny you bumped into in the streets."
"Nobody?" Wufei's eyebrows shot up. "You mean I'm supposed to be mute?"

"More than that. You can't even nod, wave or use sign language either. You - can't – communicate. You only talk to me."

"...Duo...it's an understatement to say that this will put a crimp in my ability to conduct an investigation," Wufei said, numbly shoving his hair back for the fifth time.

"Ah, but that's why you have me around."

"Wonderful," Wufei grumbled before he could stop himself; he didn't want to give Duo ammunition to get rid of him. Besides, this was his mission. He could do this. He hoped.

Duo looked at him astutely, as if guessing his thoughts. "Needless to say, you will blindly do everything I order you to. Even something illegal. Even kill."

That took this surreal and almost silly set of impositions and made them bloody serious indeed. Damn. Well, he'd done some pretty ugly things in his time...Besides, he didn't think Duo would have him assault an opponent who hadn't attacked them first. That wasn't the man's style. Wufei, for his part, had to focus on the mission and on Carver. And looking at the bigger picture, he couldn't risk Duo's position in Freeport. Trowa was right, an informant of Duo's caliber was needed there. If that meant eliminating someone who might have found him out...To save Duo's life and his own, he'd kill. He'd done it during the war. Besides, there were surely very few people in Freeport who could be deemed innocent.

He nodded grimly. Duo held his gaze for a short time, judging his resolve, then he waved his hand as if shooing away the grimness that enveloped the cabin. "Chances are it won't come to that. It's not that common for people to die in fights. You'll want to remember that. If someone bushwhacks us, draw blood, wound or maim in that order of seriousness, but only kill 'em if I tell you to."

"Very well." That was ever so slightly reassuring. "So exactly why am I not a thug? I'm just looking for an explanation here."

Duo scratched his chin, looking thoughtful. "Because...because you don't obey my orders for money or drugs or anything. You obey my orders because you trust me as much as you do your own right hand."

Wufei examined Duo's solemn face, surprised at the suddenly serious look in the blue eyes.

"It's something like...you're entrusting yourself to me. You're letting me make your decisions. Anything you do, it's as if I'm doing it. That means I'm held accountable for your mistakes and crimes."

Oh. No wonder he was afraid of what would happen if Wufei screwed up.

"Now you're getting it." Duo nodded, catching the slight widening of Wufei's eyes. "You can ask me stuff in public in theory, but there's a line you can't cross...Hmm, better not talk too much when we're out and about, just to be safe. That's how Heero handled it."

"This is..." rather weird, was what Wufei wanted to say. "I'm not saying I can't do this, but out of curiosity, why can't you smuggle me into Freeport, or pretend I'm your employee or something?"

Duo closed his eyes and breathed out through his nose. "You don't work for nobody in Freeport. We don't have employees."
What do you have then, buccaneers and gunny boys? Wufei bit back the sarcasm. He knew a bit about Freeport, but not enough apparently.

"Now, you can come aboard Freeport and work with me as a mechanic. You've got the skills. By the shitload, you used to repair your Gundam same as me."

"So...?"

"So you can do that, if you're willing to work on a mining satellite or the outer space docks for a year. Got that time to spare, copper?"

"A year?" Wufei stared at him, bewildered.

"Oy, I didn't think Freeport customs were that unknown, even among you upper crust types. Didn't you hear about the quarantine?"

"No. I mean, I heard there is one. They keep you in transient quarters and check your background, I suppose? I thought you could smuggle me past that." In fact he'd rather assumed that was the main point of hiring Duo in the first place. "Are you saying they lock people up for a year?"

"They don't lock you up, exactly. But...let's not go into that. Let's just make sure you get one thing. You're not a citizen. You won't be much of anything in Freeport. You're an extension of me. That's because you didn't go through quarantine and immigration. In a way, this is your quarantine. That's why you're not allowed to talk to anyone, or have a life or do anything without me. I'm your quarantine."

"You're not making much sense, Maxwell."

"That's because we're running out of time." Duo glanced at the ship's clock. "We'll be at the blockade in less than ten minutes. I gave you a brief outline, so what's the word, Chang? Do you honestly think you can do it? Take a minute to think about it."

Wufei did. It wasn't what Duo had said about his cover story that bothered him; he'd expected worse once the collar had made its appearance. It was all that he didn't know that worried him. Freeport seemed to have a lot of customs that he knew nothing about.

"I only speak to you? I won't be expected to talk to anybody, or be questioned?" he asked slowly.

"That's right. I can give you permission to speak, but that hardly ever happens. Ever. This is a very serious tradition, Wufei. If you start talkin' to people, even to say please and thank you, you'll be flagging that you're not who you say you are. I can't lay this on thick enough. No. Communication."

"Well...in a way, that's a good thing."

Duo's eyebrows twitched upwards in a prompt to elaborate.

"You're using terminology I'm not familiar with, and all these rules-"

"We call 'em traditions."

"Whatever." Wufei rolled his eyes at the quibble, but that was a good illustration of what he'd been trying to say. "If I don't speak to you too much, and to nobody else, the chances of accidentally betraying myself are a whole lot less. Doesn't sound too hard."

"It'll be harder than you think," Duo corrected him. "There's my orders, and there's attitude"
too...but...I think I'll take a flyer on you as far as that goes." The blue eyes were tracing his face again as if discovering something there that they hadn't thought to find. "So, you think you can do it?"

Orders. Duo's orders. Wufei hadn't considered that a stumbling block even when Duo had mentioned ordering him to kill someone, because that part didn't bother him as much as Duo seemed to think it might. Even if they hadn't seen each other for five years, even if they had always been extremely different, almost alien one to the other, there was still that grudging connection between them. They were like brothers who didn't know each other that well, but who were bound by ties of blood. A hell of a lot of blood.

Wufei was still leery of Duo Maxwell, of course. Duo was a criminal, if small time; he was a smuggler, maybe worse. If nothing else, he was a civilian. It went without saying that he did not have Wufei's abilities and priorities. But because of the blood between them, Wufei trusted Duo. He trusted Duo to not lead him astray, to not compromise his mission now that Duo realized how important it was to him. And once he had Wufei's word, Duo would trust him with his life in return. The link between them did not need perfect understanding or harmony of purpose. It was the faith of men who'd fought back to back until they'd been welded together. As if that nonsense about Blade and Handler were real. Hell, come to think of it, Duo had not said they were going to be pretending.

He straightened in his seat, one hand braced against the console, and bowed without thinking how out of place that formal gesture was here. "On my honour, I will do what it takes to complete my mission as well as keep you safe. You have my word."

"Oy, no need to be that solemn." Duo was laughing, obviously pleased despite his words, and for the first time since Wufei had shown up in Heero's stead those blue eyes were laughing freely too. "Just say 'yeah, Duo, I promise I won't screw up.'"

"Duo, I promise I won't screw up," Wufei repeated dryly, fingerimg the collar which was still a bit too damn tight. Hard to imagine Heero with this thing. Hard to imagine Heero in this situation. Hard to imagine himself, for that matter.

"I'll hold you to that," Duo tossed over his shoulder as he turned back to the console and disengaged the autopilot.

Duo didn't have to hold him to anything. Wufei was always his harshest judge, still struggling to compensate for the many failures in his past. His friends sometimes told him he was too hard on himself, but that was the only way he knew how to be. He'd sworn that oath to Duo on his honor; he'd keep it with his life.
Chapter 3

Welcome to Tijuana
Tequila, sexo y marihuana
Welcome to Tijuana
Con el coyote no hay aduana

Bienvenida a Tijuana
Bienvenida mi suerte
Bienvenida la muerte
Por la Panamericana

(Welcome to Tijuana
Tequila, sex and marijuana
Welcome to Tijuana
With the coyotes there's no customs

Welcome to Tijuana
Welcome, my luck
Welcome to death
By the Panamerican)
--- Manu Chao, 'Welcome to Tijuana'

[Whenever possible I will put the translations of non-English songs. Translations are, more often than not, my own. Sorry for any errors :) 'Coyote' refers to a trans-border smuggler]

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"Here we go. This shouldn't take long," Duo announced as he sent acknowledgement to the blockade and followed their docking instructions.

Wufei studied the small space station visible from the view port. It was an ugly duckling of a space object the size of a small building; a bunch of tubes, fuel containers, pods and antenna all lumped together. The blockade consisted of a dozen of these stations in a loose sphere around Freeport space. A Preventer five-man spinnet was docked there already, long, sleek and deadly as a stiletto, a contrast to the bulky unlovely space station. It was filling up with ammo and oxygen tanks at one of the station's spherical cargo pods before it left for a new patrol around the perimeter. Duo passed the spinnet carefully and approached another of the station's berths.

A clunk echoed through the hull and into the space inside the clipper as Duo docked against the station's clamp.

"Get your ID ready and let me do the talkin', okay?"

"Isn't that what I'm supposed to be doing anyway?" Wufei muttered.

"Not as far as Johnny Lawboy is concerned. I meant, our highly respected Preventer forces, of course."
"Of course."

There was a further thunk as the station's airlock fastened over Scythe's. Duo bounced up and drifted over to the door, hitting the release.

"Officer Dinkle, what a pleasure," said Duo. There was no overt irony in his words, but there was quite a lot in the subtext.

There was an answering grunt. Wufei released his harness and drifted over.

The Preventer's badge read Tyrone Dinkle. He grunted a second time as Duo handed him a sheaf of papers; the cargo manifest, Wufei supposed. Dinkle went over them quickly, eyes bored and completely unfriendly.

"Who's this?" His eyes flickered towards Wufei even as he turned the manifest's pages. He noted Wufei's collar and the look on his face, already unpleasant, degenerated into a sneer of disgust. "Does he have ID?"

"Yup. Give him your papers." The last was addressed to Wufei. He obediently handed over his usual cover ID he had ready. It showed nothing remarkable and no criminal record that should give him any trouble getting in and out of Freeport.

Dinkle scanned the ID and read the result with the air of one ready to pounce on the slightest irregularity. He handed it back without looking at Wufei, making sure the latter could take the ID without their hands touching. Charming. Then the officer turned towards the boxes.

"What do you have here, Maxwell?"

"It's in the cargo manifest, Ty." Duo's smile was sunny.

Dinkle gave the nearest box a hard kick on the lock, popping it open at the risk of making it unusable for future space flights. A gleam that only Wufei would notice went through Duo's eyes, but his smile stayed open and outrageously honest.

"I know you like your hair, Maxwell, but this is ridiculous," Dinkle said slowly.

Wufei glanced at the open box and then did a double take. It was filled with old-fashioned hair rollers, glaringly pink and ridiculous in row upon row of clear plastic bags.

His first instinct as a Preventer would have been to tear right through that lot to see what could possibly be hidden beneath them. He hoped to hell that Duo wasn't actually trying to smuggle anything past the embargo now, when they had a mission inside Freeport and could not afford to get stuck in jail for a few months to a year.

Dinkle rifled through a few rows, carelessly sending them floating. Duo caught them and waited until the officer had investigated the contents of the box before putting them back and carefully locking it as if it contained delicate instrumentation. Dinkle was already at another box, poking through clothes. Baby clothes, Wufei noted with nothing but dull curiosity, having run right out of surprise. Another box revealed several smaller boxes of cheap gyros, LED lights and such. A fourth was full of old computer parts, most of which looked trashed.

"The usual then. Apart from the curlers, which are weird even by your standards, Maxwell," the Preventer sniffed. He opened two of the small cartons, shook out the gyros inside carelessly, inspected them briefly and then stuffed them back in their box.
"You got a copy of that manifest?"

"Already downloaded to your station's computer, Ty."

Dinkle grunted again; it was apparently the level of communication he judged worthy of his visitors. He propelled himself towards the airlock without another glance. Duo didn't look surprised, merely drifted over and shut the lock behind him.

"That's all?!” Wufei stared at the airlock once it was closed.

"Yep, that's what I mostly get. Oh, sometimes they take a ship to dry-dock and take it apart, but that's only happened to me once in the four years I've been passing by this station with Scythe. I don't get hassled normally. They know I'm clean and honest," Duo explained solemnly.

"Maxwell, you've never been caught, but Trowa knows what you're up to and so do I."

That got him the clear-eyed gaze of the innocently accused. "Whatever do you mean?"

"Duo-"

"Anyway, it doesn't matter." Duo waved a dismissive hand and drifted back to the pilot's seat. "They know they're not likely to catch anything on me. I'll either hide it too well or, if I have something bulky, I would be taking it through the hide n' seek route."

Wufei knew what he meant by the hide and seek route: the smuggler's highway.

Freeport was surrounded by tiny resource satellites on small asteroids; patches of darkness against the stars, with a few warning lights to ward off incoming traffic and floodlights bathing excavation points or access zones. No other colony in space would bother with asteroids this size. The price to conduct large-scale mining operations on tiny scattered space dust like this would have been prohibitive. Freeport did it by employing a lot of manual labor instead of using automation and the huge excavation stations other colonies used. The numerous scattered objects and the space debris produced by mining were a navigation hazard to Preventer ships that patrolled the perimeter. They were also excellent cover for space pirates and smugglers to approach the colony without stopping at the blockade for the required verifications.

Wufei knew that most heavy-duty smugglers would use Freeport's debris field to dodge the blockade, but nonetheless, remembering Dinkle's negligent five-minute check... "That was still on the limit of dereliction of duty." Wufei automatically rolled the man's serial number and name around his mind, along with a half-formulated promise to have a word with him at one point. Then he gave Duo a sharp glance. "Wait a minute. You could have smuggled a mobile suit into Freeport with that laxity. Why did you say you couldn't get my Browning in?"

"Later, later. Gotta concentrate to get through the debris field," Duo muttered as Scythe broke loose from the docking clamp and scooted towards the multitude of pinprick lights that promised death by vacuum if they crashed into any of them. There was a clear path through the field, Wufei knew, but that was reserved for important cargo vessels and commercial freighters only. Small-time flyers like Duo had to sweat their way in.

The space debris and small resource satellites, towed or blasted into Freeport's sphere of influence by Sweepers for the most part, gave way to a cleared space after twenty minutes of careful navigation. This was the outer docks, the ship construction area. Wufei struggled internally for all of three seconds before he gave in to temptation and released his harness to get a better look out of the view port. He was acting like a tourist, he knew, but his fascination for vessels, particularly the deep-space
explorer, won out.

The spaceships were mostly invisible in the eternal night of space; only the areas where people were working were flooded with massive directional beams. The few he could make out with any clarity were cargo vessels, earth-to-moon types. The larger Mars cargoes and the deep-space explorer for the outer planets that ESUN was working on were probably on the other side of the colony whose massive frame was blocking his view of the stars more and more as they approached.

Wufei faced that darkness like one faced the enemy. Freeport. In his mind he could see the colony as clearly as it was highlighted on Duo's scope. It was wheel-shaped, though one of its eight spokes was broken, smashed through by some space debris decades ago. The mass of small resource satellites around it and ships dancing in and about its spoke and axis put it in constant danger of similar accidents. If this worried the colony's inhabitants, it was to be supposed they'd gotten used to it. It gave Wufei, a colonist himself, chills just watching that deadly tango, but he'd have to bloody well get used to it too. The hub of the wheel, its axis of rotation, was brilliantly lit and heaving with space traffic, ships docking and leaving constantly. Way more traffic than was safe, Wufei could see at a glance. He shook his head in a mixture of horror and wonder.

The warble of a comm channel prompted him to sit back down and buckle in. Duo exchanged a few words with Freeport's flight control and requested a dry dock facility. Then he leaned back in his chair and stretched against the harness like a cat.

"There'll be a delay in getting a dry dock. It might take a few minutes, but it's been known to take days. We can leave Scythe in space dock and go in with suits if that's the case. They should tell us in a sec."

"Why so long?" Wufei asked, puzzled.

"Everybody's busy," Duo replied as if that explained everything. "And they need to have someone at customs to check us in."

"Customs? Freeport has customs?" Wufei glanced back over his shoulder as if he could physically see the blockade space station thirty minutes behind their stern. He thought that was customs.

"Hmm, sure we do." Duo rubbed his eyes. He looked as tired as Wufei felt. "Gotta make sure ships don't bring dangerous shit - or people - into the place."

"Do they do a better job than Officer Dinkle?" Wufei asked sourly. He was still angry at the man. The blockade shouldn't be such a joke. It was there to stop smuggling in and out of Freeport, and detain criminals and pirates escaping the law to hide there. The contraband it was primarily checking for was weapons. Freeport had been declared a lawless zone since long before Wufei was born, and stopping the circulation of guns in such an environment was deemed the first step to pacifying it. Except so far no government had ever gotten to that next step. They just tried to keep the worst of the scum from leaving the colony and the more dangerous contraband from entering.

"Don't knock the boys and girls of the blockade," Duo admonished lazily. "It's a shitty job. If it makes you feel better, they're a damn sight more careful about what comes out of Freeport than what goes in. That means there's only very few people in the 'coming in' section, and most of those are concentrated on the big cargo ships to make sure we're not slipping in Gundanium or suit parts or something. Officer Tiny Winkle is just some poor shmuck who's waiting for his tour of duty to end so he can go back to Earth, feel some gravs under his feet, get drunk and get laid."

"That is no excuse. If all prison wardens were so lax, every penitentiary would be a war zone."
That got Wufei a rare old glare. "Jesus, Mary and Joseph, Freeport was a penitentiary to start with, but that lasted for all of ten years. And that was eighty three years ago! Fuck's sake, we get that all the time. Penitentiary this, prison that, is still an escaped convict or something. All the prisoners they had there to start with died of old age already. If they were lucky. Not that it matters a shit anymore."

Of course it mattered. Wufei's clan had been exiled from the Sino-Asian conglomerate - the one-time Chinese Democratic Republic, North Korea, Vietnam and Taiwan - sixty nine years ago, and every member still remembered the specifics of their exile down to the last detail, the politicians involved and the patriarchs that had led them to A0206, their new home where they could live on their own strength and nurture their ideals in purity and solitude. Origins mattered.

"Its origins matter to Freeport," Wufei pointed out archly. "In their case, the fact that they were a penal colony was what gave rise to their dubious status of independence, which let them-"

"Dubious independence?! Hey, mate, there's nothing dubious about it. It was even a charter under the Alliance."

"Maxwell, you know as well as I do that the Alliance used Freeport as a dumping ground for malcontents and problem cases that they didn't have quite the impetus to execute or imprison. The only reason they didn't invade and take over the damn place was that it was easier to cordon off than deal with the consequences of destroying it and then facing homeless Sweeper crews forming seditious groups all over the colonies. One of OZ's officers compared it to a relatively benign cancer that would metastasize if you hacked into it."

There was a nasty twist to Duo's smile. "And you people don't do the same?"

"Of course not," Wufei said, biting off the words. "The only reason ESUN is keeping away from Freeport and the den of criminality there is because we're a humanitarian government, and our analysts have judged that the- the illuminated lunatics in charge there are serious when they said they'd blow the place up rather than surrender to any armed forces. The death toll would be horrendous."

"It'd sure look bad on the six o'clock news, I grant ya, but you sure this decision doesn't have anything to do with the fact that Freeport builds the best motherfucking ships in the whole solar system, including the Mars shuttles? ESUN and the colonies had their fleets completely hosed during the war. They even lost most of their cargo and passenger transports. You sure the fact that the citizens of Freeport are willin' to work forty-eight hours a day to make up for war losses has nothin' to do with ESUN's patience with us?" Duo was watching him through hooded eyes, waiting for his reaction.

"I-"

"'Cause if you wanted us to give up and play nice, you could just stop all the ship orders. That'd put a stranglehold on Freeport and eventually drive all the people out without firing a single bullet. So why don't your government do that, hey?"

Wufei had wondered about that himself occasionally, and he hadn't liked the possible answers, so he gave the one that the Preventers adopted and that he'd learned to live with whenever he thought of the problem at all: "I understand that this policy is designed to give Freeport the incentive to turn to honest profit, instead of relying on- on-" Wufei gestured at Scythe's dashboard.

"Smugglers, pirates and thieves, boy, smugglers, pirates and thieves." Duo gave him a wolfish grin that reminded Wufei of the days the man was called Shinigami. "I guess you're right, Chang. We've
not changed that much since the old days. We're still lifers, every one of us. The old Space Force abandoned the jailbirds eighty odd years ago when the colonies made their bid for independence and everything went FUBAR. Everybody judged that taking care of convicts was the other side's job, so nobody did and the poor bastards were left to eat vacuum. They were given independence on a technicality, so that when they all died and Pen-003 hull-breached and went to hell, neither of the two sides of that conflict would feel too guilty. And that's still the way it is! Well, those convicts survived and so do we~

Duo interrupted his intense monologue with a look at Wufei that was rather dismissive, weaving his fingers together behind his neck and relaxing against the harness. "Yeah," he continued, "I guess ESUN and Agent Chang are correct. We're a cesspit, a bunch of death row inmates still scrabblin' for survival at the edge of the void. And you know what? We're still not ready to give up and let the good guys in to lord it over us. Your analysts hit it right on the nose. we will blow the joint sky-high at the first sign of an invasion, since that's the only weapon we have. That's the kind of insane asylum you're heading into. Still feel up to it, Preventer? 'cause it's not too late to turn back if you're willing to shell out for fuel expenses."

Wufei stared at his one-time ally. Duo was stretched back against his harness, hands behind his head and one foot on the console. His voice had been mocking on the surface. Yet underneath there'd been that strange pride that Wufei had known during the war - the 'The whole world's against me - and that's fair enough 'cause Shinigami is after its blood' mentality. The other pilots had been so serious and committed. Duo had laughed and joked and killed like a fiend, with dedication and gusto. Shinigami indeed. He'd had some grasp of the politics behind what the pilots had been trying to achieve, he'd fought for the cause, but he never seemed to take it half as seriously as the actual fighting itself. Maybe that's why he'd been such a good pilot...

He was still the same, except this time when he'd said 'we', he hadn't meant himself and the other four pilots. And Wufei found that rather worrisome. This wasn't just a place to live for Maxwell, it wasn't just a bolt hole and a base for his petty smuggling operations. This had become Shinigami's home in a much more fundamental sense. Though Duo was getting paid for this job, which showed that his practical, mercenary side was still healthy. Nonetheless, Wufei found himself rearranging his informant's loyalties in his mind.

Carver, Wufei told himself severely. Concentrate on catching Carver. Duo's allegiances mattered no more than the dubious circumstances in which Wufei was handed the mission in the first place. The only thing that mattered was that Wufei was going to put a killer behind bars. Duo's home might be Freeport these days, but Wufei had none; certainly not the small, drab temporary apartments the Preventers rented to him wherever he moved to. Wufei's allegiance was to his interpretation of justice, from the small details of stopping criminals to preventing the greater crime that was war.

After thirty minutes of a rather heavy silence, the comm bleeped. A tired voice came through the speakers when Duo acknowledged.

//Scythe, we have a dry dock for you. Ring 10, berth 49. Got that?//

Duo made a face. "Aww, man! That's gonna put me miles from home! Can't I get anything closer? I'm bushed."
...Scythe, the small creak you're hearing isn't the sound of my joints after a fifteen hour shift and it isn't the sound of the deck coordinator's nerves slowly stretching to a snapping point. It's the sound of my tiny violin cryin' over the fact you have to haul ass a few hundred meters more than ya want to. Now get the fuck into that cradle or get out. Over.//

"They love me on the flight deck," Duo said cheerfully as he nosed Scythe forward. "Plus, blowing off steam is good for them with the kind of hours they pull."

Wufei forbore to comment, not wanting to distract Duo as the pilot edged his way through an intricate ballet of vessels. There were a lot of small ships like Maxwell's about, and the Preventer's instinct was to start noting license plates because most of them were probably on someone's wanted list somewhere. Also present were slow, awkward cargo freighters, Sweepers hauling supplies into the station, as well as the massive company ships. The latter were bringing in the raw materials for Freeport's shipbuilding industry. Wufei noted logos on the ships' sides when he could see them; mainly Etoiles Inc (an old Romefeller company, that one) and Marsico, the other shipbuilding giant. Those companies owned the ships and brought the building supplies from all the other colonies which produced them. Freeport - the whole colony was officially its own corporation - was the contractor who put the ships together, and they could at present underbid every other competitor in the solar system, and had done so for the last fifty years.

Hearing what he'd heard from the flight deck control, Wufei wondered that Freeport had enough coordination to hold a shipyard together. A very successful shipyard, at that. But at what cost? From the very little he'd heard, Freeport workers lived in near-slavery to the conglomerate that sent crews out to the shipyards or mined the resource satellites around the colony for ores and other raw materials. It was an ugly picture. Almost as ugly as the haven for pirates that was the other side of the one-time penitentiary.

As a Preventer and a human being, Wufei had felt the urge to come and clean this place out more than once, and fuck the shipbuilding industry. They'd just have to cut a bit off the big fat profit margins they were saving for their stockholders rather than employ what was probably little better than slave labor. The savings they'd make from not having their cargo freighters raided by pirates should compensate them, once the Freeport buccaneers were out of space. But like a lot of corrupt and long-living systems, Freeport and the economics that supported it had their own inertia, one that would crush a mere Preventer who tried to interfere. Une was just as helpless against it as he was. Hell, even President Peacecraft and her political system was pretty much part and parcel of the powerful commercial interests that ran ESUN now that the war was over. As for the Preventers, they had too many other hotspots to deal with first. Earth and the colonies had been savaged by war for long decades. Relena's ideals of Peace, reflected in watered down rosy pictures on the TV screen, was a symbol of what might come to be. Reality, on the other hand, had a lot of catching up to do to get anywhere near it.

One day, though...Wufei stared at the colony spinning before them, berths, pipes and com-antennas bristling out of it. One day, if ESUN held its promises, if the peace Wufei and his friends sacrificed so much for held its promises...if Relena Peacecraft held her promises...then one day ESUN would have the time, money and political impetus to address problems like Freeport and get the place sanitized. It was that sort of thing that got Wufei out of bed some mornings. He would put up with the shit if the peace held its promises...

The spinning of the colony was slowing relative to them as Duo skillfully matched velocity with an almost obscene ease. The bastard was still one of the best pilots of Wufei's acquaintance, even though he had a lot of competition in that department.

Duo spun Scythe so that he was facing a rather small entry into the colony's hull. Wufei finally
"Wait. Why are we landing in the colony itself?"

"I'm dry-docking the ship. My buddy needs some more repairs, and it's easier to do that without a space-suit."

"What about zero-G docking?"

"Oh boy, those bays are reserved for the cargo freighters, man. A tiny ship like Scythe wouldn't stand a chance to dock there, even if I waited in line for a hundred years." Duo gave the console a quick pat as he spoke, reassuring Scythe that he'd not meant anything derogatory by 'tiny ship'. "Dry dock will waste fuel getting in and out and away from the gravity, but that's better than space walking to repair stuff. Easier for you, too."

"Me?" Wufei asked, startled.

"We'll be dropping by every other day or so to give Scythe its 'repairs'. That's when you can send out a transmission to the blockade on narrow beam. A hidden program in their computer picks it up and filters it to Barton and Une so that they know you're still alive and doing your job. You'll appreciate the fact you don't have to wear a space suit to do it each time."

"Oh." Wufei had asked Trowa exactly how he was supposed to make his report and Trowa had shoved him onto the shuttle with a 'Duo will explain all that'.

Duo's acceleration and curve was starting to give Wufei faint prickles as gravity crept aboard. Scythe eased into the dock. With a skillful burst of the propulsion that used the mathematically absolute minimum of fuel required, Duo centered himself above the loosely floating cradle and let it magnetically latch on to Scythe's underbelly. The clang resounded through the ship, then the groan as the cradle was hauled in by its cables and fastened to the berthing ring. Gravity was coming back fast, giving Wufei pins and needles. He clenched his muscles then stretched, getting his mobility and G-legs back as quickly as possible. Duo was doing the same. It was an old habit they'd picked up when they were fifteen and frequently had to fight a few seconds after they'd landed at any one place.

"Right, give 'em a few minutes to flood the dock. Oh, that reminds me." Duo reached back into the loose cloth bag that was now hanging ponderously from its handle. "Here. You'll want one of these."

Duo fished out a confectionary packet from the bag and picked out a thin wooden stick. He put it between his teeth and started to nibble at it. He held one out to Wufei who looked at it as if Duo had handed him a dead herring.

"What is that?"

"Liquorice root."

"...I'm going to have to ask 'why?', aren't I," Wufei muttered, knowing Duo was waiting for it. He knew that small smirk at the corner of the mobile lips. Whatever Duo was nibbling on was giving out a pungent odor, like menthol and cough medicine.

"You'll see," Duo said gnomically. "You'll be grateful for it in a minute."

Wufei took the thing Duo was offering and sniffed it dubiously. It looked like wood, though now that he was touching it, he thought it was probably an artificial imitation. From what he could see of the end Duo was sucking on as the pilot turned Scythe's systems off one by one, it was fibrous. It
wasn't meant to be eaten, just chewed. Wufei didn't have any bad habits - beyond being confrontational and stubborn - and he wasn't about to pick up this disgusting one. He leaned over and stuffed the stick into Duo's breast pocket without a word. Duo's eyebrows twitched but he didn't say anything either, his hands dancing over the controls.

"All done," Duo announced around the liquorice in his mouth. "My baby's asleep in his cradle and the sniffers await! Let's haul."

Wufei followed Duo to the airlock, picking up his knapsack and sword in passing. He hesitated as Duo grabbed one of the boxes in the cabin.

"Here Wu, take one of the other ones. These are high priority supplies. We'll unload the rest later."

"There's an urgent need for baby clothes and hair rollers?" Wufei asked dubiously, slipping on his knapsack and wishing he had a strap for his sword.

"The ways of Freeport are mysterious."

Wufei grabbed the box full of clothes and followed Duo, who'd slipped the cloth bag and duffel over his shoulder and grabbed one of the small space-proof boxes. Duo put it down next to the airlock and hit the release.

The air whistled out of the ship, to Wufei's surprise; the air pressure in the docking area was lower than in Scythe. Freeport must be cheap with their oxygen and pressure.

And then Wufei gasped and choked, instinctively covering his nose with his sleeve.

"What the-" the sentence was swallowed in a cough and a moment of panic at the thought of a coolant leak in the vicinity. Wufei fought down the moment of alarm. The air permeating the ship from the dock was icy cold, harsh and tainted with some kind of chemical. Fighting with that odor was a pervasive organic smell that turned his stomach.

"Fierce, heh?" Duo was smirking, hands in pockets and leaning against the door seal in a cocky pose. Bastard.

"I've unwrapped bodies in the morgue. I've had worse," Wufei said through clenched teeth. The smell had caught him by surprise, but it was nowhere near as bad as opening the body-bag of a five-day floater.

"Yeah, but you know how the morgue techs put a drop of eucalyptus on their surgical masks before working on the really ripe ones? This is the same." Duo had taken Wufei's discarded stick from his pocket and was twirling it agilely before the Preventer's nose.

Wufei glared at the harmless confection. But seen in that light...he reached for it only to have Duo jerk it away.

"Oh, I forgot that-..." Duo gave the stick a dubious look as if suddenly unsure of his own product. "Er, I should probably tell you - never mind, take it, you're turning green."

"I am not turning green," Wufei bit out. He was getting used to the smell once the initial shock was over. Trust Maxwell not to warn him. Duo still had that urge to score one over everybody. Childish. And stupid.

No, what was really stupid was the way Wufei couldn't resist rising to the challenge every time. He fought down the urge to just walk out of the airlock and prove to Maxwell that he could ignore the
smell. Duo was chewing on the disgusting stuff so it was probably expected of people landing in Freeport. Wufei wanted to blend in. Plus he had the feeling the smell would get nauseating after awhile, and he wanted to be at his best. He grabbed the stick from Duo, who looked surprised and almost ready to snatch it back for a second.

Wufei bit into the piece of confectionary. The flavor was like a kick in the sinuses. Even the smell didn't stand a chance. It tasted like eucalyptus, as well as aniseed and liquorice and something that left a sparkly feeling on his tongue. It was fresh, if overwhelming, and a relief. Duo snickered as if he found something about the situation amusing. Wufei ignored him out of what was soon going to be fast habit, he was sure.

They carried the boxes down the ramp Scythe had extended and headed along the docking ring. Wufei shifted the box lodged under one arm and shivered, though he felt a bit warmer now. Probably just getting used to the temperature.

"The smell's not as bad in the living quarters. Still there, but not as bad. We're not too far from the factories here. Plus, recyc's everywhere. You get used to it."

Wufei followed Duo's monologue as they made their way around the ring. It was dark in the dock, lit only by emergency lighting and a floodlight near the door.

"You'll probably be in Freeport for awhile. But if we get insanely lucky you might leave in a couple of weeks. Hey, do you guys do random drug tests? Piss in a cup kinda thing? 'Cause if they do, you might want to dodge that for a bit when you get back."

Wufei walked two steps and nearly fetched up into a support pylon as he realized what Duo had just said. He whipped the stick out of his mouth with the hand holding his sword, almost dropping it and the box in the process. "What?!!"

"I said you might want to-"

Wufei surged forward, slamming into Duo and pining him against the dock's wall with his sword-arm across the jackass's chest. "What the hell is in these things?!!"

"Fei," Duo hissed, eyes leaping towards the door. "Hands off. Customs could be watching."

With a bitten off curse, Wufei let go and took a step back, glancing around.

"It's okay for a Blade to be cantankerous, but they rarely assault their Handler, even for a joke," Duo said mildly, shaking himself and shoving away from the wall.

"Sorry," Wufei growled.

"Sorry ain't gonna cut it if you get us killed," Duo pointed out, voice still reasonable. "As for the liquorice, relax. There's a few boosters in it, that's all."

"Boosters?" Wufei asked sharply.

"Caffeine, Lydac and Ravers ."

"Duo, those are illegal! Not the caffeine I mean, but-"

"It's very small amounts, Wu, they won't make you twitchy or high. Just enough to give you a mild buzz. It's one of Freeport's few pleasures, don't knock it. That reminds me, we don't have cigarettes here. You don't smoke, do you?"
"Of course not."

"Good," Duo said, pointedly rubbing at his chest as he led the way forward. "I'd hate to see what you're like on a nicotine withdrawal..."

Wufei glared at Duo's back in the near-darkness, then at the stick in his hand. The lingering taste of liquorice was giving way to the smell. He happened to know that Preventers ran checks for that sort of drug...Hopefully Trowa could get him an exemption; he'd already bitten into the damn thing. Wufei growled internally and stuck the stick in his mouth again, following Duo towards the light.

Duo put his box down on a little cart. When Wufei had done the same, they went back to get the other three boxes from Scythe's cockpit, leaving the cargo in the hold for later. Duo shoved the cart through a hole in the wall and went to the door. It was a typical dock door, an airlock in case the space doors behind them lost pressure. Duo glanced back, taking the liquorice stick from his mouth.

"Wufei, I'm telling you now so you don't flip out. This is a small space and it'll take three minutes for the airlock to open on the other side. Sometimes longer. You want to go in with me or wait your turn?"

"Three minutes? Why?"

Duo gave him a thoughtful look. "You're gonna be asking that a lot, aren't you...Heero never bothered. With me or after me, Wu? Make up your mind, I'm tired."

Jaws clenched, Wufei followed him into the airlock. Why three minutes when there was air on either side of the door? The boxes had gone directly through the hole to the other side. Though there was an automatic pressure door over the hole to seal the dock in case of decompression, it had been open when Duo had shoved the cart through; the air flowed freely from one room to another.

Heero would indeed not bother asking many questions. His focus during a mission bordered on single-mindedness. He'd ascertain if something was a threat, usually by his own means rather than rely on third-party information, and he'd dismiss anything non-essential. If he trusted Duo implicitly, then that would be that much less for him to question; he'd just assume Duo knew best. Wufei was trusting Duo with his life, but that didn't stop him from wondering what the hell was going on even if it wasn't necessarily mission-related. Questions, however, might prove as dangerous as ignorance in Wufei's present circumstances. Freeport was, for all intents and purposes, enemy territory.

The airlock space was tight. There were maybe five inches between their bodies, and the bags were an awkward bundle at their sides. Wufei thanked his ancestors that he wasn't claustrophobic.

There was a gentle whistle as pressure equalized, then nothing but their breathing and the chewing sounds Duo was making on his stick. Wufei tried to relax against the wall.

"These are the sniffers."

Duo's voice was loud in the silence and the enclosed space, making Wufei start. He felt his hip press against Duo's duffel and their knees touched as Duo shifted.

"What-" Wufei interrupted his question. "I thought you weren't going to explain anything," he whispered, very low.

"I'll explain stuff, but when we got the time. We got three minutes to kill now. You're new in Freeport, Wu. It's normal to have questions." Duo said this loudly with a subtle nuance in his voice. Wufei gathered that it didn't matter if someone overheard. Even as far as Wufei's cover story went, he was supposed to be new to the colony.
"So what are sniffers?" he asked, still in a low voice in case he'd misunderstood Duo's drift.

"The air in here is being put through a detector. The airlock on the 'in' side will only release if the detectors pick up no traces of explosives or dangerous substances. There's also a low-dose X-ray taken of the people inside on a random basis. To make sure we didn't swallow anything, or have something up- well, you know."

"...Oh. What about the boxes?"

"They'll be searched too."

"Oh. I didn't realize."

A foot thumped his, and in the light of the small red 'locked' signal he saw Duo shake his head ever so slightly. Wufei swallowed the question and kept his surprise to himself; that they were being more thoroughly inspected here than at the blockade.

"Dangerous substances are, of course, drugs - hard drugs, not this candy," Duo added, lifting the stick from his mouth. "Volatile chemicals, explosives, gunpowder and stuff on the list."

Wufei wanted to ask what 'the list' was, but thought he'd better keep all questions to himself. Apparently the Blade he was impersonating was new to Freeport, but should still have some limited knowledge of the rules. Wufei the Preventer didn't have that knowledge thanks to this bloody last-minute rush-job exile of a mission. He'd better not ask too many questions; he didn't want to trip them up.

The rest of the three minutes crept by in silence. The air in the airlock warmed up a bit from their shared body heat. Wufei wondered how sensitive the trace analyzers were. ESUN had developed them as a way of screening for weapons and explosives, but since you needed to keep the people being checked in an enclosed space for a few minutes, it had been judged impractical. Too much of an imposition on the common civilian. Apparently Freeport didn't have the same qualms. But Wufei would never have thought that Freeport would be checking this thoroughly for guns and drugs.

Finally the airlock hissed, opening towards the room.

"Maxwell, I'm almost afraid to ask...why did you bring us hair curlers?" a voice asked dryly.

Wufei looked around as he came out of the airlock. The cart full of boxes had been pulled to one side of the small neon-lit room and a man was going through the first one methodically, with more attention than Dinkle had. He was middle-aged, dressed a bit like a Sweeper in practical, tough tans and warm jacket. Salt-and-pepper hair, not very well combed, hung to his shoulders along with a long moustache of the same length. He was holding up one of the hair rollers critically as Duo walked up to him.

"Hi Karl. Those are for the labs."

"But why."

"They use the hair curlers to keep their test tubes straight. Those test-tube holders they sell on the outside are stupidly expensive. I bought the curlers for ten creds the whole box, and once wired together they'll work just as well. They strip the plastic off so they can even go through a light autoclave. Immaculata Corriendes from the pathology lab asked me for them."

"Can't someone, I don't know, just build her some test-tube holders? Can't be that hard."
"Probably. You got the time?"

"Does it look like it? Okay, are all these for the path lab?"

"Various labs in the hospital. Just send them there and they'll sort it out. Baby clothes for NICU too."

"What about the rest?"

"Here's the manifest. It's just general stuff. Quartermaster will figure it out. These boxes are the only ones to be earmarked. Do you have someone who can take them ASAP?"

"The lab ones, yeah."

"I'll take care of the others tomorrow or next day, then."

"That'd be nice."

During the conversation, the man's attention had been split between the box of curlers - he was giving it a very thorough looking through, splitting open each plastic bag of curlers and inspecting the contents - and Wufei. The latter was being finely scrutinized, from the collar, to his clothes, to his sword.

"He's new," the man stated abruptly, looking at Duo. Wufei stiffened at the rudeness of not being addressed directly before he remembered the 'Blade' nonsense. He wasn't supposed to be questioned, according to Duo.

"That's right."

"What about...whathisname? Blue-eyed guy you had before."

Duo shrugged, looking away. Karl watched him for a few seconds then dived back into the box when he didn't get a direct answer. "Lemme finish these and then I'll check you guys through. Is, ah, this one staying?"

"We'll have to see." Duo chuckled, but it wasn't a cheerful laughter. It sounded a bit damp, and his shoulders slumped at the end of a half-hearted gesture. Karl's gaze was sympathetic.

"Hm, guess you can never know, heh, Duo? Damn, if this guy's new, that means I gotta fill in a load of shit on the system." Karl blew into his moustache with an annoyed huff.

"Sorry, docker."

"Yeah, yeah." Wufei found himself pinned by another stare, and this time it was ever so slightly hostile. He kept his face neutral since he had the feeling there was a bit of context here that he was missing.

The man checked the curlers, then went through their bags professionally, rifling through their clothes and toiletries. He even reached over and took Wufei's sword from his hands. Duo put a restraining hand on the Preventer's shoulder as he was about to tear himself and his blade away.

Then Karl took Wufei's fingerprints and passed a small pocket scanner over his inner wrist, with UV light that lit up his colony tattoo, registering it in a computer system that looked antiquated. Wufei wasn't sure why the man bothered with the tattoo. It was an old custom that people had used to identify newborn babies ever since Space was colonized. Since Earth people didn't have it, it wasn't used as an ID system. In fact he wasn't even sure his own was registered anywhere, now that his
colony was destroyed.

"Right." The man shoved the keyboard and terminal towards Wufei. "Put your name here. Oh- Duo, does he know how to write?"

"Ah yes, he does," Duo replied with a grin.

"Good. Put your name here. Duo will fill in the rest."

Wufei typed in his name - Wu Fei Chang, common enough in the L5 cluster to not be traced to his job - and left the space in front of the keyboard to Duo who filled in the rest: Duo's name, vessel and Freeport address. There was no requirement for Wufei's address or any other detail that he could see.

"This is his first time in Freeport?" Karl asked as he hit a few keys once Duo had finished.

"Yes."

"Has he been a Blackcap long?"

"Nope."

"Oh." Karl frowned deeply at his terminal.

"But I vouch for him," Duo said, tone serious and final. Wufei could appreciate the import of those five words when he remembered Duo would be held responsible for his Blade's infractions.

"Good enough for me," Karl answered with a nod. "Welcome to Freeport, Wu Fei." He was looking at the keys he was carefully typing rather than at Wufei when he said this, which was fortunate because Wufei had nearly bowed in response. He caught the gesture in time. Duo's eyes had flickered his way but he was now looking wholly unconcerned and innocent of any Preventer infiltration that might be going on.

"'Kay, I'm gonna go hit the sack," he announced. "Been up for over thirty-five hours running with nothing more than a nap on Scythe. C'mon, Wu. See ya, Karl."

"Be safe, Maxwell," Karl threw over his shoulder without looking up from his keyboard.

The door out of 'customs' had just closed behind them when Wufei realized two things. First, that he'd gotten past immigration procedures that put a lot of ESUN methods to shame...without once showing his identity papers.

Second, he'd made it onto Freeport.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

I always saw Wufei as raised in very traditionalist values (he was in an arranged marriage at 14 fer cryin' out loud), so his view on such things as gender are rigid, at least until the more amenable side of Wufei - the part of him that was tenderized with a meat hammer during the war - comes to the fore. Views expressed by the main character are not the authors etc.

I met my love by the gas works wall
Dreamed a dream by the old canal
Kissed a girl by the factory wall
Dirty old town
Dirty old town
Heard a siren from the docks
Saw a train set the night on fire
Smelled the spring on the smokey wind
Dirty old town
Dirty old town
--- 'Dirty Old Town', The Pogues

"Welcome to Freeport!" Duo exclaimed with a sweeping gesture as if he were giving Wufei the colony on a platter. "What do you think?"

Wufei looked up and down the long corridor. "I think I've seen more attractive submarines."

Duo snickered as if that answer had been everything he'd expected it to be, and walked away with a wave of his hand inviting Wufei to follow.

Their steps echoed in the wide hallway. It was as badly lit as the docking ring: a long tunnel with wires running along the unpainted wall, with the occasional crop of crude light bulbs sprouting out of the tangled vines of cables. The floor beneath their feet was steel with metal lattices down the centre under which ran pipes of various girths, coded for water, high-power lines and sewage in corroded colors.

They passed dozens of doors leading to other docking rings to reach a huge open-sided elevator. Further down the corridor, men and women bundled in long coats and mittens put boxes and crates onto a wide electric cart, but nobody looked their way as the elevator clunked and started to rise.

They were in complete darkness for fifteen long seconds as the elevator climbed through the thick floor separating the docking ring and the section above. Then they were through. The elevator didn't stop; it continued to inch its way up the wall, slowly revealing another part of Freeport to the newcomer's eyes.
Wufei tried hard to keep his customary inscrutable expression as he leaned against the elevator's
guardrail and looked out into the huge sector around them.

"You okay?" Apparently his attempt to keep his surprise off his face had been only partially
successful. Duo was examining him. "You look like your eyes and nose are itching. Smell's pretty
bad here, heh?"

Yes, it was. The chemical reek was choking as they rose above Freeport's industrial zone.

Freeport had been a working penitentiary at its beginnings. Wufei had absently envisioned a
workshop full of license plates or something on that scale. Apparently the colony had expanded on
whatever it had been bequeathed when it had gained its independence. The industrial sprawl
dropping slowly below them was immense.

The yards and buildings were lit by harsh white floodlights. The remaining shadows were peppered
with smaller lights, red for warning and green for emergency exits amidst yellow streetlights. Huge
factories echoed with the bang of manufacture, the roar of turbines and the growl of heavy
machinery. Instead of chimney stacks, pipes sprung from the buildings like arteries; they pumped the
poisoned air to a huge filter unit the size of a house, hissing and belching out vapor, the hot air
mingling with the cool temperatures of the colony. From the heavy chemical stench prickling the
insides of Wufei's nose, Freeport had considered it an unwanted luxury to filter out anything other
than the truly toxic chemicals.

A hiss and rich golden-red glow caught his attention. A few buildings away from where their
elevator crawled up the wall, a huge vat of molten metal had tipped its contents into long molds
manipulated by cranes. Making steel girders, he guessed, though it was hard to tell. A waft of
scorched metal scent drifted over the two observers. The steel sparked and flamed in the molds,
turning cherry red as it cooled. It was like the third of the ten levels of Hell, Wufei thought a bit
fancifully; the level traditionally reserved for felons, drug traffickers, tomb robbers, fences and
rioters. How very appropriate.

Duo spat out a piece of the chewed up stick he'd been gnawing at and spoke loudly over the din:
"The stuff we need for the shipyards is shipped from other colonies, but we cut costs by making
some components here. And other stuff for Freeport itself, like pipes and metal panels and shit."

"Is that a chemical plant?" Wufei asked, his eyes fixed on a building at the edge of the colony's
'horizon'. It was ringed with a complex array of long pipelines, tanks and distillation vats.

Duo leaned past him to look, almost too late to catch a glimpse of it before it was hidden by the
colony's curve as the elevator rose higher. "Looks like it."

"Good gods, Maxwell, that violates every rule of- of fundamental security-" Wufei closed his lips
tightly, remembering the insane waltz of ships outside, each a potential threat that could crash into the
colony at any time. Right. Freeport apparently had fairly loose standards that way.

"It ain't nothing real volatile. We don't allow that on the colony." The elevator had dragged them
through another floor, obliterating their view of the huge space below and plunging them into near-
darkness again, relieved only by the dim lighting of the elevator's buttons and emergency exit sign.
"Anything explosive is kept on the mining satellites or in floating refineries out in space, same as
other colonies."

Wufei remembered the tiny figures scurrying around the yards, driving trucks, working around those
pipelines and vats of molten metal. Whatever Duo said, he was rather glad to not be in their place.
Being on the same colony was going to be bad enough.
"Nearly there." Duo was looking upwards where a dim light promised the end of the elevator ride. "Then we can take the shuttle to the living quarters."

So they wouldn't have to walk? Good. Wufei was getting tired. It wasn't only the past two weeks that were catching up with him; he'd been pushing the envelope this past year and, hard as it was to admit it, he wasn't fifteen any more.

He shouldn't have to feel like an old veteran just because he was now twenty, but he remembered his younger self when he'd first joined the Preventer's Special Unit as another man entirely. Riots, unrest, multiple plots...he'd faced them all with the zeal of someone recently and finally converted to the ideals of Peace. The unrest had lasted over a year, but then things had started to quiet down. The lessening tension had felt like a reward for their hard work, a promise that things were really improving. Humanity had learned its lesson.

But then last year, riots and trouble had started to boil up again in the colonies and some hot-spots on Earth. Mainly L3 and L2, with a few of the L4 mining colonies thrown in. Wufei had spent over a month hunting down gunrunners in L3, trying to keep the situation from erupting into something worse, and then he'd been doing extreme riot control for Une in L2. And those two weeks on L2-X953. If he never saw that particular colony again, he'd die a happy man. At this point he didn't care if he was in Freeport or in Hell: he just wanted to get to where they were going and sleep in a bed for the first time in over eight days.

The elevator left them in a wide bay. On one side was an elevator pod waiting to take passengers through a hole in the ceiling, going up into one of the spokes leading to the Zero-G docking bay at the axis of the colony. Duo walked past it and stopped at the edge of a platform besides several sets of train tracks which vanished into the darkness of a tunnel on either side of the bay. There was no one else around. They'd barely made it to the platform when a noise down the tunnel announced the train's arrival.

It was automated, with only two wagons behind a small engine. Four people were sitting together in the first wagon, but Duo got into the second empty one. Wufei followed him to a set of hard plastic benches.

"Maxwell, where are we going to start looking for-" the train started and completely drowned Wufei's words. There had been no attempt to soundproof the train's carriages or do much about suspension. Wufei felt his teeth rattle, and he grabbed the edge of his seat to avoid being bumped off. After a few seconds the train's rhythm eased and the ride was a bit smoother, but it was still too noisy for conversation.

They rode without a word for a few minutes. The train slowed and stopped a couple of times. Two people got on at one of the stops, going into the other carriage. Wufei didn't have the patience to continue grilling Duo during the few seconds of respite from the noise.

Another stop and someone entered their carriage. Wufei observed him discreetly. Male, late twenties, medium height, thick build, black hair, dressed in protective gear soiled with oil and marks of solder wiped off on his thigh...

Wufei's skin prickled as he realized that the man was staring at him, then at Duo. The Preventer shifted, making sure his scabbard wasn't blocked by the seat. Before he could get truly concerned, the man looked away and tossed his hard hat on a bench five rows ahead of them before sitting down. Wufei glanced at Duo. The latter was chewing his liquorice with a sleepy air. If he was disturbed by the factory hand's unexpectedly intense scrutiny, he didn't show it.

The train shook in a bone-jarring bump over a set of points. Wufei looked out the grimy plastic...
window in time to see the open doors of a massive airlock pass them by. They must be entering the half of the wheel that contained the living quarters. The airlock was there to isolate it from the industrial zone in case of a serious fire or explosions, a thought that wasn't really all that reassuring.

The ride became smoother, the noise faded to less-than-deafening level, not that Wufei felt at leisure to talk with the stranger sitting nearby.

"Here, this is our stop," Duo announced, nudging Wufei. "We'll go through Volt, it's faster and I want to drop by Chris's stand."

Wufei followed numbly, trying to shake some feeling back into his body, nerves deadened by the vibrations. His ears rang as the train pulled away. He followed Duo to yet another airlock.

"You're not afraid of heights, right?" Duo tossed over his shoulders as he led Wufei through a low tunnel.

"Of course not," Wufei muttered.

"Good." A door opened with a wheezy automatic creak as they approached. They stepped through it and out onto a large skirt of metal over a drop of several hundred feet, dimly lit by the ever-present yellow and red bulbs.

"What..." Wufei realized there was an elevator platform slowly rising to meet them. "This goes all the way through to the outer hull?"

"Yeah. There's one of these shafts every three or four sectors of the living quarters. There are two levels in this part of Freeport. The outer level of the wheel is storage, pumps, filters, recyc, hydroponics, all that sorta stuff. The middle section is the living quarters, and the highest level is the shuttle tunnel."

"Oh." Wufei glanced around. The elevator platform was still some distance away and there was no one around. "Duo, what exactly am I supposed to know? As your, er, Blade?"

"You heard what I told Karl. You're new in Freeport, and a new Blade too. That means you're allowed a number of dumb questions, and hopefully it'll give you some leeway if you screw up." Duo looked like he was rather expecting it. Wufei throttled an acrid remark. "Keep in mind, though: people who come to Freeport...well, they already know about it. Hell, I practically lived off Freeport legends in the fucking godawful slums I grew up in, and so have most people who managed to make their way here. There's stuff all spacers like me know about. And you..."

Duo gave him a look at that point. It was steady, measuring and slightly dismissive.

"You are rather misinformed," Duo finished, looking away again.

Wufei could feel his hackles rise, though he couldn't deny Duo's words. He didn't actually know all that much about Freeport except for rumors and legends, and those were mainly about the lawlessness and criminal underworld that thrived here. Wufei had been too busy on Earth and the more orderly colonies to worry about Freeport these last few years. Before that, Freeport was a haunt of low-lives and pledge-breakers that the scion of an honorable colony would know nothing about.

They stepped out onto the platform as it ground to a halt with a thump at their level. It was ten feet by fifteen, big enough to carry small cargo, open on the side with only thin guardrails protecting its passengers from the drop below.

Wufei was about to ask another question when a noise interrupted him. It grew louder, a grinding,
chugging, hissing uproar echoed around the metal walls like a drum being relentlessly pounded. Wufei had his hand on his sword's hilt, a gesture of defense ingrained into his bones however useless in this instance. He stared wildly at the ceiling above their head, remembering the ships dancing around the colony's wheel-

"Cargo train!" Duo shouted above the noise.

Oh. Wufei stood down with a shudder. In his mind's eye the chemical plant was exploding, sheeting the colony's air with fire and gasses; ships were tearing into the hulls; all the space debris outside was pounding through the walls...

"Get many incidents of space mania in this dump?" he asked as the racket above their heads faded with a distant rhythmic clacking of wheels on tracks.

Duo simply shrugged.

The elevator crawled down a few more feet. Wufei stared around him. Apparently the lack of lighting was generalized. The darkness was oppressive.

"What's the suicide rate?" Wufei added a bit snidely.

"What you got to realize is that most people in Freeport have as many lives as a cat, and they spent over half of them getting here," Duo said, nibbling his stick with every appearance of unconcern. "Space puppies like us tend not to let the wibblies go to our head."

"The lives of a cat? Then by any reasonable estimate, you have a tab running, Maxwell."

Duo smiled proudly, but his reply was cut by a ringing thump coming from below, followed by a ratcheting clatter.

"And so has Freeport," Wufei added, his voice a bit hoarse. "What was that?"

"Someone moving a cargo pod down below," Duo answered without glancing around. His eyes were still on Wufei, weighing. "All this gonna be a problem for you, Chang?"

"I was born and raised on a colony," Wufei reassured him stiffly. And to be honest, A0206 had been pretty dilapidated too. Wufei had grown up, like most space-born citizens, in an environment where a sharp metallic 'ping' could be the sound of a gasket breaking, a seal breaching, the start of the invasion of the void that surrounded them and tried to rip them apart at the seams every second of their lives. All colonists lived with that constant feeling of vulnerability, with the ever-present precautions they had to take, with the knowledge that if something went wrong there would be no second chances and probably not even a first. They lived at the mercy of vacuum and that was notoriously merciless.

The pressure broke some people down, reduced to wrecks by the constant inescapable knowledge of their own human frailty in an environment that was as ultimately as hostile to them as it could get. The incidence of space mania had decreased steadily in the last two decades on civilized colonies, where some effort was spent on mimicking earth conditions; fake skies, day and night cycles, artificial breezes and as much nature as the colony could afford. But the human mind couldn't always be fooled. Those who succumbed to the phobia either went back to earth or ended up in a psych ward. But Wufei had learned to live and fight in space. He had his flaws, but that one, fortunately, had never been one of them.

- a second grinding thump echoed up from the shaft, followed by a deep, creaking noise -
Until now, a small part of Wufei amended. It was the part that had had the nightmares when he was seven, after his parents had been killed in a shuttle accident. It knew what vacuum victims looked like...But he reined in the memories. This wouldn't be a problem. The mental discipline of the warrior would keep him focused even as the survival instincts of the colonist were telling him to get the hell out of this deathtrap already.

The elevator platform stopped after dropping seventy feet, and they stepped off. Another airlock protected the living quarters. It hissed open to a waft of air and the scent of a lot of people living in close proximity.

The sector was darker than any night on earth could ever be. The ceiling was invisible above their heads. The streets were lit by harsh white neon, nearly blue in their intensity; space lighting, the kind his colony had only used in hangars and docking rings. They sliced the eternal night of the streets into monochrome chunks.

But the scene they illuminated was not the one Wufei had expected. He'd envisioned a seedy slum, lit up in all the colors of an oil slick by neon advertising bars and strip joints. Freeport's air was rich with the smell of a rather inadequate sewer system and the chemical tang that had followed them from the industrial zone, but the stench of rotten garbage, piss, vomit and misery were absent.

The habitations were the expected pre-fabricated easy to assemble boxes found on most colonies, though Wufei had never seen such a heteroclite bunch brought together. It looked like Freeport had scrounged them together from every end-of-line sale there'd ever been. The buildings stood four to six stories high on either side of the wide streets and nearly touching the invisible ceiling.

Their steps echoed as they wound their way through the prefabricated canyon. Everything was metal here, no care had been taken to hide the fact they were in a glorified tin can floating through space. A dribble of steam eased out from under a manhole cover, air warmed by the sewage system beneath it escaping into the ambient chill.

A cat, thin and feral as a rat, paused as it crossed the street to eye them coldly before disappearing into a crack between two buildings. Junk had been stacked there with odd neatness and order; bed frames, broken chairs, a smashed computer screen, cracked cupboards, pots of paint...After the next block was another open space lined with benches. A seesaw and a sandpit were being ignored by the kids playing there, though apparently not by another cat which was carefully digging away at the sand. The three children were dressed in grey and tattered woolen jumpers against the cold. Their voices bounced around the buildings, shrill and loud before being completely drowned out by another clatter from up above, a bit more muffled than in the elevator shaft but still ominously present. Wufei tensed. The kids didn't even pause in their game or glance upwards. An elderly man on a bench watched the children without interfering in the rough-housing. He appeared to be darning socks. He had a whole stack of them next to him, and he split his attention between the children and his needle.

Duo walked down the street with his usual assured gait. Wufei followed more slowly, observing everything while keeping up a pretense of disinterest. There were no shops that he could see. Maybe this was just the 'dorm' section of the colony. A few citizens leaned out the windows or sat on stoops, talking. They watched the two men pass with an open curiosity which surprised and worried the Preventer. These inhabitants didn't look like layabouts. They were dressed in thick workman's pants, jumpers or coats, and he didn't see any of them drinking or taking anything illicit. Damn, Wufei remembered, taking the liquorice stick out of his mouth to glare at it, at this point I'm more of a disreputable figure than they are.

"Just stopping at Chris's stand," Duo said over his shoulder. He turned down a road perpendicular to
the main thoroughfare. A few carts had gathered halfway down the street, metal frames cobbled together with cheap plastic boarding, small enough for one person to push around without too much trouble. They were gaily decorated with colored paper and paint, the first splash of vivid color Wufei had seen in Freeport apart from the arterial red of warning lights. A couple of women loitered nearby, talking to one of the stall vendors in the low, intense voices of gossips everywhere.

Duo drew up before the most colorful of the carts. There was something colorful behind the cart, too. Wufei, with mission-born concentration and culturally ingrained restraint, managed not to stare. Chris, if that was him - her? - was a thickset person in vivid red overalls with an electric blue shawl over round shoulders. Bulky fingers worked some knitting needles, turning grey wool into a thick-knit tube. He... she?...seemed to have a good five o'clock shadow going on thickset jowls that were nonetheless cheerfully rouged. Eyes outlined in the same color as the shawl measured them up.

"Hiya, Duo. Who's this?"

The gaze on Wufei was piercing, astute and measuring to a fault. Wufei adopted the same neutral look he'd used with Karl. He knew it made him look cold and a bit arrogant, but it was better than coming across as defensive.

Chris tossed his long locks, dyed black, over his shoulders (on reflection, Wufei felt pretty sure it was a man, though he wouldn't have bet his life on it). "He's cute," the creature announced, not making Wufei feel very flattered. "New Blade? What happened to Heero?"

Wufei started slightly at his friend's name.

"Heero's...not here," Duo said. Once again, he sounded a bit more pained than annoyed. "Long story. Outside stuff."

"He okay?" Chris asked. There was genuine concern in the brown eyes as they returned to Duo.

"Yeah, he'll be fine. This is Wufei. He's new."

"I know," Chris put in dryly. "I'd remember that pretty face if I'd seen it before. Damn, Maxwell, isn't it bad enough you're the cutest thing on this colony, you got to dangle some more attractive goods I can't have under my nose?"

Face neutral, Wufei reminded himself.

"That's life, Chris." Duo smirked. "Say, can I have some liquorice?"

"You got some just the other day," Chris said, thick brown eyebrows, like a pair of combed caterpillars, raised questioningly.

"I need some straight stuff. No boosters. You got that, right?"

"I got that, sugar. What's wrong, Chris's little bundles of comfort not doing their job anymore?"

Duo grinned his most winning smile. "I love 'em more than ever, Chris, you know that. It's for Wufei, he'd rather not have anything interfere with his sword arm, yanno?"

"Ah." Once more the eyes tracked over Wufei inch by inch, from his sword, to his face, to the collar, to his stance. "Okay, I can swing that. Just a sec."

Chris put down his knitting and picked up a small confectionary bag. Wufei had taken a quick overall measure of the cart as they'd approached. The merry colors and decorations framed a dozen...
big bottles and crates full of sweets. The words 'Chris's Candy Shop' were painted on the cart's side. Chris reached into a small box, drew out some liquorice roots and put them into the bag. Wufei lost sight of things then as he suddenly noticed that the bottle next to that one contained brightly colored pills. The big glass jar next to that contained some more of the liquorice sticks which, he remembered abruptly, were not as innocent as they appeared. They were interspersed with bottles full of homemade candy canes and bonbons - well, they looked homemade. And they looked like candy, though at this point Wufei wanted forensic evidence of that.

It was a struggle to keep the neutral look on his face as he remembered the kids playing nearby. He stared at the predator with his brightly colored 'candy shop' and wished he could actually do something about it. He felt repulsed that Maxwell would even stop here.

Chris passed the packet of sticks to Duo, who handed them to Wufei. After a second of frozen immobility, Wufei forced himself to reach out his hand and take the things. Duo led him away with a wave back at Chris. "I'll chat later, gorgeous. I'm barely keeping a-flight now, I'm so tired. Gonna go bunk. Stay safe!"

"Sure. You stay warm now," Chris replied with a cheerful leer.

Wufei followed Duo stiffly through the streets. A loud rattle echoed around the buildings, ringing through the empty space and around the metal streets and alleys; another cargo train passing over their heads.

"Relax, man. It's not as bad as you think."

Duo's voice had been so soft that Wufei barely heard it over the metallic clanging filling the sector's empty spaces.

"What?"

"Chris. It's not as bad as you think. Most of those pills are homemade homeopathic meds for sleeping or digestion, or some very mild shit."

Wufei lowered his head and glanced around, alarmed.

"No, don't worry, you held your cool remarkably well," Duo continued with a smirk, as if reading his mind. "But Heero had the same reaction and I'm ready to bet you two are wired pretty much the same way, hm?"

"Oh." They were in an empty stretch and the echoes of their voices still muffled by the train rattling over their metal ceiling, so Wufei leaned over and chanced a hiss. "Tell me, Maxwell, does he also -"

"She."

"Whatever. Does she also sell this 'mild shit' to the kids?"

Duo's reaction was immediate, a sudden tension and a hiss. He took a sidestep and, to Wufei's shock, put an arm around the Preventer's shoulders, dragging him near. The gesture was companionable, Wufei realized after a mental stutter of surprise. They probably looked like a couple of friends talking quietly over the noise.

"Wu..." Duo glanced around. "Look, don't...ah, never mind, we'll deal with that later. Don't ask any more questions, okay? And no, Chris would never give any drugs to a kid. She's a responsible citizen. A well-respected figure in this sector as a matter of fact."
Wonderful. The friendly local drug dealer.

"One more stop. I gotta pick up my boots from Madir. He should have them repaired by now.'

Duo dropped the arm he had around Wufei's shoulders and headed off on a side-trip again. He twisted down two alleys between buildings and fetched up in a small courtyard. There were rows of big metal shelves along one side and a workbench on the other. The man behind the bench was looking at the courtyard entrance as they came in, alerted by their steps ringing against the metal of the streets outside. He was tall, big-boned with stooped shoulders. His coffee-colored skin was tainted with the sallow tone characteristic of a lack of UVs. A scar nearly bisected his nose giving it a bulbous, spongy appearance.

"Oh, Maxwell, you're back," he murmured.

"Hi, Madir. You got my boots ready?"

"Yeah. Shouldn't look too bad. You gonna be wearing 'em down to the soles again?" Madir's eyes had skipped over Duo to fasten onto Wufei.

"I'll do my level best," replied Duo with a smirk.

"Lemme check them. Glue should be dry. 'Bout time you changed them though."

"I can't!" Duo seemed honestly horrified at the idea. "Me n' those boots go way back!"

"Yeah, I'm sure yer mam wore them, you little spacer rat," said Madir with a snort.

Wufei stiffened, but Duo just laughed. "Nah, Mad, it was your mom who gave them to me. Why do you think I'm so attached to 'em?"

"Attached to 'em? She was that good a lay?"

"'Course not, they were my payment, and man, I earned 'em!"

Face neutral, Wufei reminded himself again.

While Duo and Madir continued to exchange endearments and checked the repaired soles of a pair of black boots, Wufei felt a prickle of eyes on his neck. He glanced discreetly over his shoulder. A kid, seventeen or thereabouts, had poked his head out of the second story window and was staring at him. It was the same stare Chris had given him. Wufei couldn't think of anything he'd done to attract so much attention. Unless it was the collar? But the boy turned the same look on Duo a few seconds later. Duo, true to form, felt it immediately despite the distance. He twisted around while rearranging the boots in his arms. Instead of being discreet like Wufei, Duo stared at the kid directly. The kid didn't glance away and they measured each other for a short while. Then Duo went back to talking with Madir as if nothing had happened.

Footsteps alerted Wufei. He turned from the kid, who was staring at him again, to see a young woman enter the courtyard and stop a few feet away. She started to scrutinize him too. Wufei fought to keep the unreadable look on his face; if it wasn't the collar that was making him stand out, then he was having grave doubts about his cover. The woman continued to stare at him, completely unabashed. There didn't appear to be any hostility in her gaze. Wufei found himself returning it almost aggressively and her eyes didn't even flicker.

Just as Wufei wondered if he was going to have to embark on a staring contest, Duo finished his civilities with Madir - Wufei had stopped listening when he heard the term 'goat' - and stepped away
from the workbench. The woman took Duo's place, nodding to Madir who suddenly looked a whole lot more polite. She had a baby in a carrier on her back, about a year old, chewing on a bright green pacifier. The kid turned the same point-blank stare on Wufei who felt his eyes begin to water.

"C'mon, let's go home," Duo tossed back as he headed out of the courtyard. Wufei, rather unsettled, flinched away from the brat's gaze and followed.

He waited until they were once more on the main thoroughfare which was still mostly empty.

"Duo-"

"Nearly there. We're at the lock. Then we'll be in Makh sector, where I live."

The thoroughfare went through a double airlock, separated by a low corridor of a dozen feet. Both locks were open, though they would slam shut at a drop in air pressure or fire on one side or another. Their footsteps echoed in the corridor. A light at the end shone on a nameplate. Ma-something. Not just 'Makh', but Wufei didn't have time to make out the peeling paint; Duo was accelerating.

They walked for another five minutes. The buildings in this sector were low and sprawled, with junkyards and big courtyards ringed in by chain link fences. Things scurried in the piles of scrap as they passed. Wufei let himself imagine it was simply a few more cats. The streets were nearly deserted. The few passersby all gave Wufei the same long searching stare. Duo must have noticed, but he didn't look particularly worried so Wufei tried to put it from his mind.

Duo headed towards a grey three-story building. There was a man sitting out front in a wheelchair, a plaid blanket over his legs. He was reading a book out loud in old French to a pre-teen sitting on the stoop. He looked up as they approached. The same gun-barrel gaze was leveled at Wufei, who was beginning to get used to it.

"Hey, Duo, you're back. Who's this?" He had a thick accent Wufei couldn't place. Maybe L3's Slavic population.

"This is Chang Wufei. As you can see, he's my new Blade." Duo reached over, snagged Wufei's shoulder and shoved him forward like he was showing him off. The man squinted up at him and Wufei noticed a faint scar crossing one eye. The blue cornea was dim.

"Wufei, this is Gilla," Duo continued. His hand was squeezing Wufei's shoulder almost painfully, a reminder not to bow or nod or say anything. It was hard, especially when Gilla himself waved a greeting.

"Hi, Wufei. Nice to have you here. Not that I want to pry, Duo, but where's-"

"Heero isn't available. For the conceivable future. Unless things change," Duo replied curtly.

"Himno, did he go and get married?"

"Er, no." Duo looked blank. "What on earth made you think-"

"He just struck me as the kind who could easily get entangled with a woman and not be able to get himself disentangled short of strangling her. So he's either married, in the army or in jail." Gilla nodded wisely. His voice was deep with a cultured tone that sounded out of place here compared to the other citizens of Freeport Wufei had met, including Duo for that matter. The young girl by Gilla's side, sitting on a ragged pillow, still hadn't said anything, though she was staring at Wufei as if memorizing his features for a future police line-up. Wufei wasn't all that surprised by now. Apparently this was the Freeport norm. He returned the gaze somewhat resignedly. Her features
looked more mature than he'd first thought. She was probably older than his initial estimate of six
years old, just small for her age. She was wearing brown pants, rolled up at the cuffs to fit her, with
pink knit pantyhose beneath and a pair of dirty sneakers. Her jumper might have been blue once. It
had faded to mottled grey with washing and was also a bit big for her. But her hair and face were
scrupulously clean, and she didn't look malnourished. Or strung out for that matter, Wufei reflected
gloomily, remembering some of his more depressing trips to Amsterdam and Neo-Tokyo.

"No, don't worry. Heero and I had a little disagreement, you might say." Wufei thought he caught a
flash of a look thrown his way. Duo had said that in a rather dry manner. He'd apparently not
forgiven Heero for the inconsiderate hospital stay that had left him with Wufei on his hands.

"Oh, I see. And this young man...?"

"Is also an old friend. Bit of the same story, really."

"Hmm." Gilla scrutinized Wufei again. He had the same gaze as Karl, slightly hostile, as if he wasn't
sure he trusted Wufei and intended to keep an eye on him. It wasn't very promising. It was also a bit
puzzling that he'd shown no signs of this suspicion when he'd first greeted the Preventer.

"Gonna go hit the sack, Gill. Been up for longer n' I can count at this point. Stay safe. You too, little
bit."

The girl's serious countenance broke into a startlingly bright smile for one short second, then she was
back to gazing at Wufei as if she suspected him of having stolen her puppy. Wufei followed Duo
into the building's interior with some relief.

"I live in the back. I have the yard to myself, too. It's enclosed, not that that makes it any warmer.
Except if I have an engine running, and then it's warm and stinks up the place." Duo's voice bounced
around the corridor like the braid bouncing against his tan jacket. Wufei stared at it, hypnotized by
the swaying motion in his current state of fatigue.

"This door is to Gilla's. This door is to Babka's." Duo jerked a thumb at two doors on either side of
the hallway. A few feet further, two similar doors also received an introduction. "This is the toilet,
and this is the shower room. The whole building uses them. The guys upstairs said they didn't mind,
and it saves us from having to set up and maintain a water pump. Water pressure is kinda lame most
days anyway. I won't tell you to spare the water, you're colony-born."

"Yes," Wufei answered belatedly. Duo was already on another subject.

"-will have a job to finish at some point in the next three days. Don't know how long it'll take me." D
 Duo opened a door at the end of the hallway, still talking.

A flick of the switch near the door lit the neon over a small kitchen area immediately to their right. It
was delimited by a long metal table with a cubical fridge beneath it, a microwave, cheap kitchen
cabinets against the wall, some shelves holding a few condiments, a plastic basket of cutlery and
three plates. A small high stainless-steel sink stood close to the kitchen area. It looked oddly out of
place to the tired Preventer until he realized it was the same model as the ones found in shuttles. Duo
must have salvaged it and played with the plumbing. The mirror above it was cracked, but both
looked clean.

The rest of the room was dimly illuminated by the neon and splashes of streetlight sneaking through
locked steel shutters of a window to their left. A second door in the opposite wall, of strong steel
with a good lock, must lead to the yard Duo had mentioned. A window beside it was also shuttered
and let no light through.
A metal worktable ran along the whole left side of the room. Several toolboxes lay open around a half-dismantled mechanism. Wufei took a second, longer look at it, and walked over with a gathering frown.

"Maxwell-"

"Construction mecha," Duo cut in with the heavy sigh of one who's used to being unfairly put upon.

"Really? Looks like the stabilizer unit of an Aries to me," said Wufei, hands fisted on his hips as he scowled at the mechanism.

"That might be where we got it from," Duo admitted vaguely as if searching his memory. When Wufei looked at him the blue eyes were teasing. You're in the middle of Freeport, Lawman, they said. Whatcha gonna do about it?

"We patch up our mechs with whatever we can get our hands on, Chang. If it makes you feel any better, we don't have any of the suit's weapons here," Duo continued, his voice generous and slightly condescending. "This place is enough of a disaster area without waving around things that could blow chunks out of the hull."

Since there was no way for Wufei to verify that, he'd have to take Duo's word for it. He doubted he'd have the luxury of investigating this, though in theory he should. Freeport arming with mobile suits took precedence even over Carver. He'd keep his eyes open, but in the balance of evidence, he did tend to trust Duo. The man might be a bit mercenary and something of a fighting fool, but he'd sacrificed just as much as the other pilots had, putting himself between two armies to defend the colonies and stop the slaughter. Wufei didn't think Duo Maxwell would be party to starting a new war.

There were two swivel chairs in front of the worktable, the only seating available in the place. Apparently Duo ate at his workbench or on the bed. Two metal cupboards stood against the opposite wall to the right of the entrance, and there was a small bookcase full of books, vids, and computer disks next to the bed.

Ah, the bed. The double bed. With two pillows. Wufei managed not to look at it too pointedly, though since that was it as far as furniture was concerned - not even a couch - it was obvious there was nowhere else to sleep. He wondered again what might be between Duo and Heero, and more importantly, whether Duo expected them to share the bed too.

Duo was already ferreting around one of the cupboards. He drew out a rolled-up mat and a sleeping bag. Wufei felt torn; relieved at not having to share sheets with a man he hadn't known for over five years, but a bit disappointed too. So much for sleeping in a bed again. Damn.

"Here, set yourself up- well, wherever you want to, really. Avoid the worktable area unless you want to get woken up by soldering sparks one of these mornings."

Wufei opted to bunk down against the far wall under the window, halfway between Maxwell's bed and the workspace. It wasn't the most comfortable of setups, but the sleeping bag looked warm, and Wufei had roughed it out in worse. He laid out the mat and bag, dropped his knapsack next to them, put down his sword and glanced around, taking stock. So this was going to be his base of operations for the next few weeks. In just this one small room with Duo, his workbench, and -

He looked around a second time, then a third, more carefully.

"You don't have a TV?"
"No, buddy, sorry." Duo was unpacking his duffel, heaping clothes carelessly into one of the metal cupboards. "Reception out here is crap, there's more static on Freeport's incoming vid channels than there is data packets. Nothing much interesting on anyway. The news comes in through the 'net. I play movie vids on my laptop if I have the time, and a few sectors have big screens where they retransmit the games from L2 on high-band linked for that purpose. S'got a twenty-second delay, but it's better than nothing. Hope you have a friend back home recording your favorite shows, or you'll be missing out."

Well well, maybe Freeport had one small solitary thing to recommend itself for after all.

A yawn behind Wufei preceded a sleepy announcement: "I've been up and around for way too long, Chang. How about you? You tired?"

"Yes," Wufei answered shortly. "I've not slept since- for awhile." He'd been trying not to think about the situation he'd left behind. The riots still simmering, the problems with the governor of X953, and Heero still in the hospital. Hopefully Barton would be able keep on top of all that. Wufei rather wished he could have delayed this trip for a day or two, just to make sure Heero was okay. Head wounds could be tricky. But he'd not been given an option. Besides, by their best estimates Carver had returned to Freeport two weeks ago, just as the riots on L2- X953 were getting into full swing, fleeing the trouble like a rat leaving a burning ship. Wufei didn't need to give the killer any more time to dig himself deeper into Freeport.

He caught one of the pillows Duo tossed him and sat down on his makeshift 'bed', arms around his knees. "What are our steps now? How are we going to find Carver? Do you have any idea where to start looking?" Then, on reflection, and in a lower voice: "Can we talk here?"

Duo glanced around automatically. "Yeah. Babka's a bit deaf and Gilla's mostly out front. The inner walls are kinda thin though, so don't start preaching about law and order at the top of your lungs." Duo snickered at Wufei's stony look. "We'll worry about Carver tomorrow. Just follow me around, keep your mouth shut and watch my back. That's all Trowa wants you to do." The latter was said with thinly veiled irony.

Wufei grunted - then he flinched and glanced up automatically at the ceiling as a distant racket heralded the passage of another freight train. As far as assignments went, this one was shaping up to be one of the worst. He just hoped he'd be able to stick Carver in jail by the end of it. That'd make it somewhat worthwhile.

"You hungry?" Duo had tossed his tan jacket on the end of the workbench and was toeing off his steel-capped boots near the door.

"No." Wufei had given up on the liquorice, not liking the slight buzz that came with it. The smell wasn't too bad here, or else he'd gotten used to it, but its remnants and the fatigue were making him a little nauseous. "Do you have anything to drink?"

Duo wandered over in his socks to the small fridge and opened it. "Soda, juice, filtered water. You wouldn't like the stuff they have on tap here."

"Juice."

"Yessir. Note that normally you should be the one getting this for me," Duo pointed out, though not very strenuously. He took out a couple of bottles, opened them by levering the tops off against the counter, and walked over to Wufei with another yawn.

Wufei took the bottle with a grunt of thanks and caught Duo's right hand at the same time, stopping
him from straightening up and pulling away.

Duo's initial flinch of surprise gave way to indifference. He said nothing as Wufei examined the black glove and the fingers he'd captured.

"When did this happen?" Wufei asked.

For a moment he thought Duo wouldn't answer and he let go, trying to think of something to say.

"Two years. Bit more now," Duo finally replied. He dangled his bottle by the neck with three fingers of his right hand and used the left to shove up the cuff of his long-sleeved shirt. The skin-tight black glove went up past the elbow. It had a band around the top that glinted metallically in the light from the kitchen. Duo's fingers twisted around it and the band released with a soft click.

Wufei stirred, feeling uncomfortable. "You don't have to-"

"I take it off to sleep," Duo informed him, rolling the glove down. The metallic band had left red spots on his biceps; pressure points from electrodes. There were others further down too, on his forearm.

Bottle and glove in the left hand, he held up the right, fingers splayed. The little finger had been shorn off at the first joint, leaving only a reddened stump. The right ring finger had been cut off at the second knuckle, a triangle dip showing where the joint had been removed. There was more scarring, rough pink pits in the flesh along the side of the hand, the other fingers and his arm.

"Looks like shrapnel damage," Wufei hazarded, a bit puzzled.

"Coulda been. Explosion in a feeder tube on a half-built ship in Zero-G. I was lucky, really. My colleague got one eye and part of his face blown away, and the engineer had her legs broken. Found shards of her kneecaps ensconced in the bulwark. Still walks with a hella limp. I got off easy."

"But you can't steady a gun anymore," Wufei pointed out bluntly. He doubted Duo had ever needed anything sugarcoated in his life.

"Well, I wouldn't get my hands on one in Freeport anyway. I can still pull a trigger outside. When Heero and I go chasing people in the outer satellites, I use a sawed-off shotgun. Subtle it ain't, but it gets their attention." Duo's grin was wide, open and quite savage.

"The glove gives me some mobility and grip," he added, waving it around gently. The fingers that corresponded to his missing digits were still full. Prosthetics, activated by the muscles and nerve inputs in the arm, transmitted by wiring in the glove. They moved in good synchronicity with the intact fingers, but to a trained warrior like Wufei, they'd stood out already back in Scythe, as soon as he'd seen Duo touch his instruments. "I was pretty good with my left hand already. It don't slow me down much. 'S funny, ain't it?"

"What is?"

Duo turned around, stuffing the glove into his back pocket. "You and me, we came through the war pretty much intact, compared to Heero and Trowa at any rate. It's the peace that mangled us."

"Very ironic," Wufei agreed, unlacing his boots with one hand.

"Quatre's the only one of us who's kept his baby-fine skin intact till now."

Quatre has his scars on the inside, Wufei thought as he finished his orange juice. He watched Duo
through his eyelashes as the smuggler removed the other glove and sat in one of the chairs. Duo seemed to have taken his injuries with the same uncaring acceptance Wufei had. Neither of them had ever expected the universe to give them a break just because the war was over.

He tugged off his boots and rummaged in the knapsack full of Heero's clothes. He remembered Duo packing a pair of sweats in there. He took them and one of his t-shirts and toiletries and headed towards the door.

"You'll have to use this sink here." Duo was looking blindly at the shuttered window while he toyed with his bottle of juice. "The toilets and showers don't have any."

"Oh." Wufei headed towards the toilet anyway, then came back and brushed his teeth in the tiny sink. He nodded numbly as Duo headed out the door, saying something about 'dumping a load too'. Wufei changed his clothes quickly, his eyes fixed on the mat and the sleeping bag, which were looking very attractive by now. He heard Duo's voice in the hallway and Gilla's deep rumbling bass in return. He didn't wait but slipped into the bag.

His eyes shut before his head even touched the pillow. Two weeks sleeping when he could, a few hours at a time while the riots shook the colony L2-X953 and its neighbors. Then no sleep once Heero had been injured. Wufei had held the fort, done what he had to do while Une and Trowa were in transit and before the riots could escalate into a full-blown revolution. He'd snatched only a few hours on the shuttle on his way to the RV with Duo; he'd been intent on reading up on Carver, preparing for the new mission. And then...His mind lost itself trying to calculate his average sleep time in the past two weeks. It kept coming up with a number that was too ridiculous to contemplate.

Soft noises in the background of the darkness that was nibbling at his consciousness. Duo. Getting ready for bed. Coming near him.

"Wufei? You asleep already?"

Wufei couldn't open his eyes. He grumbled 'yes', or at least that was his intent. It came out as barely a grunt.

"That's what I thought."

Wufei sank into sleep, though a part of him stayed alert, feeling Duo still standing over him. Staring down at him with the same assessing look that had confronted Wufei all day...others were standing behind Duo: Chris, Madir, the young mother and Gilla, all staring...no, wait...Wufei realized distantly that he had his eyes closed, so he couldn't be seeing them...he was dreaming already...

"It's gonna be a pain draggin' you around Freeport, Wuf." The whisper was no louder than the dream encasing him. "Not to mention a health hazard. And I expect you to have a coronary at some point."

Coronary...coroner...corner...

"Still...it's good to see you again."
Chapter 5

We sail tonight for Singapore
Don't fall asleep while you're ashore
Cross your heart and hope to die
When you hear the children cry
Let marrow bone and cleaver choose
While making feet for children shoes
Through the alley, back from Hell
When you hear that steeple bell
You must say goodbye to me.

We sail tonight for Singapore
Take your blankets from the floor
Wash your mouth out by the door
The whole town is made of iron ore
Every witness turns to steam
They all become Italian dreams
Fill your pockets up with earth
Get yourself a dollar's worth
Away boys, away, boys, heave away
---Tom Waits, 'Singapore'

Wufei came awake in a single lethal instant, his fingers grasping the hilt of his sword before he could analyze the noise that had woken him: a door opening. Further down the hall, though. Voices and footsteps of people leaving the building. Duo's apartment was silent, dark and undisturbed.

He rolled over, eyes darting around the nearly invisible corners of the room. There was absolutely no change in the lighting that slipped in through the shutters from the streets outside. He glanced at his watch. Eight hours had passed. The colony must not have a night/day cycle, as he'd suspected. That was going to take some getting used to.

Eight hours of sleep. What a luxury. He should probably feel guilty.

He glanced over at the bed. The covers were thrown back, the sheets rumpled grey ghosts in the obscurity. Duo was nowhere to be seen.

Damn. Now he did feel guilty. And furious.

No, Maxwell would not be stupid enough to ditch him and go out hunting Carver by himself. Right?
They had an agreement!

Wufei threw back the sleeping bag with an aggrieved growl. He grabbed his clothes and then hesitated. If Duo was gone then Wufei couldn't go running after him. That would be unwise. So might as well go and take a shower. Maybe inspect the fridge for anything edible, his stomach suggested with its own growl. Then when Duo came back, Wufei would be awake, refreshed, fed, and ready to flay him if he'd done something dangerous.
There was an impressive lock on Duo's door, but Wufei didn't have a key. Damn. Well, he would only be down the hall, and he'd hurry his shower. He took his sword with him as a matter of course, and a threadbare towel he found in one of the metal cabinets. He made sure the door didn't close behind him and walked towards the shower quickly. He tried the handle and, finding it unlocked, wrenched the door open with a swift glance at the empty hallway behind him.

Duo stopped scrubbing his back and glanced over his shoulder -
- Naked shoulder, water cascading over it to fall to his-
"Ah, you're up-"

Whatever else Duo might have said was cut off by the door closing just as briskly as it had opened.

Wufei hastily retreated back to the one-room apartment. His emotions vacillated between anger, embarrassment and a certain earthy appreciation of the brief sight which he didn't want to admit to. He finally settled on anger as being the most reliable and the one he needed to feel the least awkward about.

Damn that Maxwell! Why didn't he lock the shower door?! Wufei stood halfway between the workbench and the bed and glowered at nothing. He concentrated his thoughts and irritation on unlocked doors and exhibitionist smugglers. He avoided thinking about a naked shoulder...braid carefully gathered and pinned...water falling down a muscle-padded back to- not thinking about that. Maxwell's fault. Should have locked the damned door. Anybody could have walked in and seen the water cascading down a strong back to run down a firm - not thinking about that in particular.

Wufei spun around as the door to the apartment opened, ready to bite that braided head off.

"You could have just come in, yanno."

Duo was wearing nothing but a towel around his hips.

"There're three shower heads."

Not a very big towel at that.

"I'll take my shower now," Wufei growled, marching towards the door.

"Oh, wait."

Wufei paused without glancing back, hand on the doorknob.

"You have to put the collar on if you leave this room." Duo's voice was serious. "You should be wearing it at all times anyway."

Wufei turned around, eyes on the floor, and went back to the pile of clothes he'd discarded eight hours ago. He didn't remember taking the collar off, but he realized now he'd have been hard put to sleep while wearing it. He fastened it around his neck reluctantly.

"Are you hungry?"

"Yes," Wufei replied shortly, tightening the leather through the buckle. He tied it a bit looser than before. As long as it didn't slip too far...

"What do you want to eat?" The fridge opened behind Wufei, there was the sound of rummaging. Annoyingly, he didn't even have to look; his unruly imagination was busy providing him a visual of
Duo kneeling down in that dangerously short towel. He breathed in through his nose and gathered his usual strength of mind, banishing the inappropriate mental image. This was not the time for those kinds of thoughts. His control was normally impeccable on a mission, but Duo had caught him off guard.

"T've got tins of soup if you want to do it Asian style," Duo mused. "They're not very good, mind you. Or we can grab a couple of N-bars and eat on the road."

"Energy bars are fine." Though he was hungry, he still didn't feel much of an appetite coming on. The Freeport tang in the room was compounded by the faint smell of old solder and burnt plastic, it clung to his tongue.

"Okay. Got some more juice-"

"Can I go now?" Wufei cut in, hand once more on the doorknob. His temper had ignited. Considering how chilly it was in the apartment, Wufei was fast coming to the conclusion that he was being deliberately teased. The last wisps of the brief carnal pleasure evoked by that sight in the shower-room disappeared like the sulfur on a struck match.

"Did you need the soap?"

I swear, if he even smiles, I'll- Wufei turned around, his knuckles white around his sword's sheath, but Duo's face was perfectly straight as he handed over a brown unmarked bottle.

"Soap and shampoo, can be used for both. I've got some conditioner-" Duo turned towards the sink where he'd left his toiletries bag. The towel chose that moment to give up its precarious hold on his hips.

"I'm fine," Wufei ground out, already half out the door.

"Whoa, sailor, it's not like I got something you don't."

The door closed on that chuckled statement. Wufei stomped down the hallway to the shower room.

This was annoying. And unusual. He shared the shower-room with Heero after a mission and it had never been an issue. But his well-disciplined mind had already stamped Friend and Colleague on that particular case, and consigned it to the Do Not Go There file. That same well-disciplined mind was having problems classifying Duo. An ally? A friend of five years back? A criminal? A stool-pigeon? Whatever. There certainly wasn't room for anything else in that description. Except for 'complete lack of propriety'.

With firm resolve and self-directed irritation, Wufei stuck Duo in the same file as Heero and a few other colleagues. He would insure that such a lapse would not happen again, even if the pain in the ass trotted around naked. Which Wufei wouldn't put past him when he remembered the taunting way Duo had watched him strip yesterday.

Wufei swung the shower door open and slammed it behind him, glaring at... the spot where a lock should have been, if there had been one.

In the same instant he realized he wasn't alone in the room. He spun around, stumbling against the door.

The woman stared back at him, squinting myopically. She was in her late sixties, her body wrinkled and worn, breasts hanging over rolls of yellowish skin on her torso. Her grey hair, in tight curls all over her head, had gotten wet under the spray. The eyes, rheumy with age, fastened first on his
"Oh, you must be Duo's new Blade. Gilla told me he met you."

Fortunately shock had robbed Wufei of anything more revealing than a gulp.

"You're new to Freeport, he said." The woman was scrutinizing him, leaning forward like an old bird, hands on thighs. Her eyes caught on the scars revealed by the t-shirt's sleeve on his left arm, rose to his face again. She took a step towards him to get a better look. A pressure plate in the floor whispered as her weight left it, and the water turned off. "Hmm, you certainly look new, and I don't even have my glasses on."

Wufei kept his eyes riveted on her face as if one of her sons were behind him, holding a gun to his head. He knew she had children because he'd noticed an old C-section scar, though he really wished he hadn't. His hand started to scrabble for the doorknob behind his back.

"Just hang in there a minute. I'm done, you can have it."

She shuffled to the door against which Wufei was pressed. He quickly moved aside, though he couldn't believe she'd just walk out of there like that.

The door groaned open. She reached out and grabbed a fuzzy robe that had been hanging on a hook outside, and toed in a couple of slippers. The robe had probably been white and considerably fuzzier once, but it was clean, and a hole at the shoulder seam had been neatly patched. She used it to towel herself off without any sign of embarrassment. Wufei was by then studying the water spigot and pressure plate system as if his life depended on it. She slid her feet into the slippers with a small 'ahhhh' of pleasure.

"There you go. If you hang your pants or towel outside the door, it will indicate someone's using the showers. Most people will not intrude unless they're really in a hurry. We do not have so many people in this building that we need to take communal showers. Good luck in Freeport, child. Have a safe day."

'I'm sorry', 'Thank you', 'I have my sword right here if you want me to kill myself'. Wufei could have been tortured to death before uttering a word to break his cover, but a little old lady almost undid him. He clamped his lips over the words that his sense of respect for his elders wanted to spill out even if he would be lynched for them.

The door clicked behind her. It took Wufei a minute or two to nerve himself to undress, hang his clothes outside and go take his shower. He stared at the door as if the weight of his scowl could keep someone from bursting in while he was vulnerable and unarmed. The water cascaded over his hair and body, tickling his scars; it smelled of iron and chemicals. What a way to start the day...

He expected to find Duo in the nude on his return, just to annoy him, but that was far from being the case.

Duo was wearing black, head to toe. Tough black pants reinforced and padded at the knees, crotch and high waist, a black shirt tucked into them, the black boots Madir had repaired, a long black leather trench coat down to his calves and a dark smile as he checked the spring-loaded sheath of a dagger strapped to his left forearm, over the glove. More than the clothes, it was the stance, the smile, the gleam in blue eyes that were shockingly different. This wasn't the cheerful space-jockey Wufei had been recently reacquainted with. Wufei's Preventer instincts, honed over the past five years of working among dangerous criminals, were prickling.
"That was quick. Here." Duo smoothed down the trench's sleeve over the sheath. The leather was so fine and flexible it slid like cloth. He picked up a foil-wrapped object and tossed it to Wufei. An energy bar, Wufei could tell through the wrapper, though there was no brand name on it, only a number.

Duo hooked a foot under one of the chairs and rolled it at him.

"Sit, Chang."

Wufei sat down with a frown. Duo's predatory stare was making his own aggressive instincts stir, but he smothered them. He had to cooperate.

"I need to know everything about the recent L2 riots, particularly the radicals you arrested," Duo announced, tone hovering on the edge of an order. "Names, age, the shape of the mole on their butts, the works. A normal Preventer wouldn't know this unless he cuffed them himself, but I know Heero spends all his free time readin' every goddamn crime report and arrest sheet that comes in, and I'm willing to bet you're the same."

"Yes," Wufei admitted shortly. "It's useful to gain a comprehensive overview of radical organisations in the colonies and be able to recognize any potential-"

"It means neither of you has a life, but in this case I won't complain. Spill."

"Why?" Wufei countered without blinking. Yes, of course he was going to cooperate, but he wanted to know what he was cooperating with. That was only part of the reason for the counter question, though. Despite his best intentions, he was reacting to the unspoken challenge.

Duo took a step nearer, hands in the pockets of his pants. He was looming over Wufei in the chair, using the advantage of being fully clothed and standing. If that was meant to impress the Preventer, then Duo was forgetting which of them was the one who usually conducted interrogations. Wufei knew all the tricks. He met the dangerous blue gaze with his own, challenging Duo to say 'because I told you to'.

Instead, a sudden smile changed the heart-shaped face radically. "You got attitude, Chang. And you don't impress easy. That's good." Duo took a step back and leaned against the workbench. The level of threat in the air vanished as if it had never been. Duo gestured lazily in Wufei's direction with a cup of coffee that had apparently materialized straight into his hand. "I still need to know that shit, mind you. I need to find out what's changed out there, in the L2 underworld. I don't have that many feelers in the colonies that rioted, and from what his file says, that's where Carver worked these past few months and where he left from. So go on, fill me in."

Formulated that way, the request was reasonable, and none of the information was highly secure. But Wufei was silent for a few more moments, perplexed. He was normally a shrewd observer and judge of character, and right now he was damned if he could tell which, of the deadly smile or the cheerful grin, was the mask that hid the other.

He put the puzzle aside for now, until he had more observations to work with. He'd apparently passed one more of Duo's little tests.

"After I debrief you, will you tell me what I need to know about this place? Since we're going out?" Wufei stared pointedly at the coat.

Duo was silent in turn. Wufei didn't try to match the aggressive stance he'd been given previously. This was also a reasonable request; there was no point making a cock fight out of it.
Finally, Duo scratched his neck beneath the braid. "I'd tell you all you need to know if we had six
weeks. As it is, I can't really think of anything that is bound to trip you up if you don't talk to me
where others can hear. Whatever I tell you, I won't cover every possible situation or problem that can
crop up. You'll just have to play it by ear and listen for my cues."

Wufei judged that in silence. He wasn't all that surprised. Duo was a seat-of-the-pants pilot and
operator, and he probably would have a hard time organizing his thoughts into a strategy that didn't
rely on improvisation. Heero must have hated it. But then again, Heero had had a bit more time to
acclimatize.

"Think you can manage? You can always stay here, I-"

"No."

"I won't be doing anything really dangerous."

"No."

"You really think you can do it?"

"Yes."

Wufei didn't bother trying to meet Duo's dubious gaze and stare him down. This was not up for
debate. He opened the bar's plain wrapper and started telling Duo a bit more about the violence that
had shaken L2 and L3 in the past year.

The heavy chain scythed the air a bare inch above the man's head. If the blow had landed, the two-
inch links would have caved in the fighter's skull like an egg.

Wufei tried to move, to walk on by. Duo hadn't even noticed that his Blade had stopped following
him. He was up ahead, cleaving through the crowds of drably dressed factory workers like a slim
black shark through a shoal of sardines. Despite his best intentions, Wufei's eyes flickered away from
Duo's receding back to the two men trying to kill each other.

It's not like I can do anything, he told himself, but he tensed as the chain whistled again. The man it
was aimed at ducked. He had a bloodied bruise on his forehead, partially hidden by lank brown hair,
and he was limping. He didn't stand a chance; his opponent was taller, heavier and didn't seem
injured. Wufei wondered which part of him was rooting him to the spot, goading him to intervene:
the Preventer who wanted to restore law and order, or the warrior who insisted on a fair fight.

"Wu."

The words were very soft in his ear. A discreet hand tugged at his jacket.

Wufei kept his face unreadable as he turned away. Nobody was looking at him; the factory and
space-dock workers who'd stopped and gathered around were all staring at the two circling fighters.
A man with a piece of red cloth tied around his forearm was shooing people back. But not away. No,
apparently, watching this- this execution wasn't a problem for the citizens of Freeport. Wufei shoved
his way through the gathering crowds of men, women and older children, ignoring the thunk of
metal hitting flesh above the brief cat-calls and the frantic shuffle of feet.

Bile churned in his mouth. But this was Freeport. He drew one of the plain liquorice sticks from his jacket's pocket and bit into it savagely.

"It's not my sector. A Red Band was there, so the fight is legit. Can't do anything."

The words were soft. Wufei glanced at his informant. Duo looked and sounded indifferent, but there was a small frown-line between his eyes. It disappeared as they turned the corner, the metallic ringing of boots against street covering sudden shouts from the crowd.

"That kinda stuff never happens without a good reason," Duo added with a shrug. "None of our business. You okay?"

"Yes." He wasn't, but it wouldn't change anything.

"Come on, then."

They'd been walking for over an hour. The streets had been empty when they'd left Makh, but in this sector they were full of men and women in the half-pressure suits worn by zero-G workers all over space, or thick, grey overalls of factory staff. A shift must have just ended, and people were going home. Shouts of recognition rang out, people waved as group blended into group, separating into the narrow alleys, breaking for airlocks into other sectors. Most of them looked tired, but not particularly desperate, downtrodden or under duress, which was what Wufei had half-expected from all he'd heard about Freeport's working conditions. The Preventer had put a question mark next to that piece of information in his mental file on Freeport. This could have been a scene at the end of the workday in any other industrial zone on Earth or in the colonies. Or so he'd thought until they'd stumbled upon the duel in the middle of a large street.

The two men who'd been fighting with short, heavy chains weren't dressed like factory workers. They looked more like Duo and Wufei and the dozen other thugs he'd spotted among the groups of workers like killer bees lurking alongside the drones. Maybe that's why none of those good citizens had intervened. They were letting the crooks fight it out between themselves. Which might be considered fair enough but they didn't have to watch.

Wufei put a throttle on the reaction. He was going to be living and operating here for weeks; he had to distance himself from what he was seeing. He concentrated on keeping his thoughts off of his face as he followed Duo.

He picked out a few more wolves from the sheep as he passed them. Leather, bike jackets, long coats, heavy metal belts, fatigues, tattoos, caps, spiked collars, insignia from various gangs...the Freeport criminal class wore the universal uniform of thugs everywhere. A few had long knives hanging from their belts; that was the only weapons he spotted. He didn't assume they weren't carrying anything more lethal, concealed in those bulky jackets and coats. He just hoped Duo was right when he said guns weren't prevalent in Freeport.

What was surprising was that, apart from the two guys trying their damn best to kill each other back there, most of these thugs weren't doing anything out of the ordinary. They walked, talked, shopped at carts and hung around with the workers as if they were on par with them. There was no sign of the overblown arrogance and blatant intimidation that distinguished gang members from the ordinary citizens in slums throughout the space sphere. Wufei watched with some disbelief as two tall bushy-haired men in spiked leather jackets, fierce tribal tattoos all over their faces, helped an elderly citizen manhandle a big bag of potatoes through a window and presumably into the guy's kitchen. Duo moved on too quickly for Wufei to see if the gangers tried to shake the old geezer down afterwards,
but he didn't think that was the case.

The eternal neon night, the steaming grills over gutters and the shouts and rasp of feet ringing on metal streets went on and on. Duo didn't seem to be in any hurry to start their investigation. He stopped at gaudy carts offering their wares to the home-coming workers. Most of what was on offer looked hand-made: knitted jumpers in bright, cheap colours; foods still in their pans and dishes; toys crafted from moulded plastic or welded iron; a few knickknacks, cheap hand-made jewellery, pottery and baskets. Other carts had rows of books and vids on them. Some of the carts looked unattended. Wufei supposed their owners were in the houses nearby, keeping an eye on their merchandise.

Duo frequently stopped to chat with the vendors and acquaintances, including some of the gang members and other criminals. Wufei listened to their conversation, riddled with space lingo and vernacular, trying to see if Duo was doing some clever investigating under cover of talking with old buddies. If he was, Wufei didn't catch it. It mainly boiled down to saying 'hi', getting the latest news and finding out who was screwing who.

The Preventer reined in his impatience and forced himself to listen to the words and the cadence of speech. Might as well learn to blend in, just in case Duo ever let him talk in public. But it turned out Freeport was a worse medley than L1. 'Fuck' was comfortably integrated into the vocabulary and the only common denominator Wufei could make out, otherwise dialogues twanged with every accent under the sun and in space. After a couple of hours of observation, Wufei concluded that the only way he'd be able to stand out in Freeport, as far as speech patterns went, would be to stand in the middle of the street and shout 'you're under arrest!'

"Tired?"

Wufei gave Duo the contemptuous look that ridiculous suggestion warranted. Duo grinned in return. "Good. 'Cause we're about to make our first real stop."

Duo jerked his thumb towards a warehouse between two buildings. 1290 was painted over the hangar door in numbers three feet tall.

Duo opened the door to the side entrance. A bell clanged over his head, announcing them. Long workbenches laid out with various tools lined two of the walls, a counter ran along the third. A small flight of stairs led down to the floor of a workshop full of machine-tools with programmable stations and boxes of metallic scraps. To Wufei's surprise, there wasn't anything being produced there. A woman in her forties was busy at a milling machine in the back, working on something that Wufei couldn't make out. The only other person in the workshop was a thickset bald man behind the counter. He had a finger on the page of a thick, dog-eared instruction manual and he was holding up a piece of machined metal, but he'd stopped studying it when Duo and Wufei had entered the shop. He was scrutinizing them suspiciously, giving them the straightforward, weighing look that Wufei was fast recognizing as a Freeport trademark.

He put down the piece he'd been examining and, after another dubious look at Duo's coat and Wufei's sword, he crossed his arms above a rounded belly. His fingers were thick and heavily callused with traces of numerous small burns and cuts gained on the machines in the back room. "Yeah?" he asked, not very pleasantly.

"I'm looking to talk with Theodora Harris," Duo said, stopping a few feet from the counter, hands in pockets. For what should have been a relaxed pose, it exuded a surprising amount of steely self-confidence.
"Yeah? And who are you?"

Duo was silent, looking the man over minutely.

"I want to speak to Theo, not you," he finally said, smiling in a way that clearly dismissed Pot-Belly from consideration.

Pot-Belly didn't like that one bit. His brows, bushy enough to make up for his baldness, merged together over a bulbous nose as he scowled.

"Look, kid, I don't know who you think you are, but my youngest is older than either of you brats. Why should I bother Theo over the likes of you?"

"I want to meet her to discuss a business route," Duo drawled. "I'm a Scissorman and I have a business deal for her."

"You? A Scissorman? Don't make me laugh, kid, the doctor told me it'd strain my arteries."

Wufei watched the interaction from beneath his lashes, keeping his face cold and distant. Scissorman, another piece of space lingo, one he'd heard before. A Scissorman was an underworld 'fixer', an intermediate who set up deals, put people in contact with other people and got a cut, a commission on whatever lucrative, illegal contract was passed. They could also provide things for people, smuggling it to them if need be.

"I want to talk to Harris," Duo repeated. There was the slightest shift in his stance.

"Beat it, boy, before I tell your ma." Pot-Belly shoved the instruction manual out of his way and leaned forward against the counter. Neither ex-Pilot missed the way his other hand dropped casually beneath it.

"If you want to talk to my mother, you'll need a good medium," said Duo in a coldly amused voice that left the impression he'd slit her throat himself for a couple of credits. "I'm interested in some trade routes. Cargo to the Black Nines and back. Fragile cargo."

Pot-Belly hesitated. Whatever he was grasping beneath the counter shifted minutely with a tiny metallic noise. The counter was a long high table. The front was nothing but brown paper stapled to the frame, it would not stop a shot.

"I know you're from L2, kid, I can hear it from your accent." Pot-Belly sounded more careful now, but still obdurate. "You might think you know all there is to know about freetrade in and out of those colonies, but you don't know nothin'. It takes more than five cred and a lollipop to pay for a trip to the Nines. A customer who'd ask you to be his fixer must be either broke or stupid, and Theo don't deal with those kinds. She's got friends she can't let down."

"Oh? Anybody I know?" Duo asked.

"Get lost," Pot-Belly bit back, arm flexing as it held whatever weapon he had under the counter.

"Oy," Duo sighed heavily. Blue eyes flicked towards Wufei. Hesitating an instant. "You're being so stubborn. Can we at least leave you our names so Theodora can get back to us?"

"Yeah, sure," Pot-Belly snickered, relaxing a fraction.

"Good. Wufei, show this docker our credentials."
Wufei reacted instantly, darting to one side, sword hissing out of its sheath. Something twanged heavily under the counter. And then Pot-Belly was pressed back against the far wall, eyes crossing wildly to keep in sight the sword that had stopped a breath away from his carotid artery.

Wufei had expected a bang, or the muffled pop of a silenced shot. What weapon made that kind of noise? He glanced behind him quickly, since Pot-Belly was away from the counter now, frozen against the far wall and not likely to move anytime in the next hour.

To Wufei's horror, Duo hadn't dodged. But he didn't look shot, either. He was looking at Pot-Belly with a smirk on his face, hands still in his pockets. The woman at the other end of the workshop had stopped her milling and was staring at them, but she did not look armed or ready to interfere.

Since nobody else was about to do anything, Wufei reached over the counter and felt around with his free hand, his sword's point still a quarter of an inch away from Pot-Belly's throat. His fingers touched metal and cable, something more complex than the shotgun he'd expected. And though it swivelled on a ball-point axis at the brush of his fingers, it seemed fixed to the shelf too.

A flicker of concentration, a small breath in. Chi flowed from his chest to his belly, up his arm...A wrench, seemingly effortless, and whatever it was came loose in his hand with a metallic crunch. Pot-Belly's eyes bugged out and his mouth dropped open as Wufei lifted his prize to the top of the counter.

...A crossbow. Tight little lines, light, made of aluminium alloy, very professional. Double-loaded, a second bolt still in the cradle. It looked like a sport competitor's pride and joy. Wufei stared at it, stunned, then glanced at the wall behind Duo. He spotted the bolt planted in the cheap plaster easily enough now that he knew what he was looking for. The paper covering the front of the counter had a neat little hole he could have slipped a finger through.

Fortunately Pot-Belly was goggling in amazement at the torn-out fixtures that had anchored the crossbow to the shelf rather than looking at Wufei's face, because it must have been a picture for a moment there. In his entire career as a Preventer and his previous one as a soldier, Wufei had been shot at with all manners of weapons up to and including mechas and battleships, but nobody had ever tried to nail him with a crossbow before.

Judging from the hole in the paper and where the bolt had fetched up, Pot-Belly hadn't been trying to nail him either. The bolt had been aimed between the two men and intended as a warning shot if Duo proved difficult. The second bolt remaining in the crossbow would have been back-up if the first wasn't enough to get them out of the shop.

Duo walked slowly up to the counter, glancing in appreciation at the crossbow. "Nice piece. So you'll be giving our names to Theodora, right?"

Pot-Belly made a gulping sound. He didn't have the leeway to nod.

"I got a small question first..." Duo put a gloved hand gently on Wufei's sword arm, pressed down ever so slightly. Wufei withdrew the blade, keeping it ready to thrust just in case Pot-Belly had any other surprises in store. Though by now he really was beginning to believe that there might not be any guns in Freeport. Who the hell fought with swords and crossbows in the age of Gundams?

"You were jawin' about Theodora's friends." Duo smiled kindly at Pot-Belly who'd let out a wobbly breath once the sword was withdrawn. "Anybody I know?"

Pot-Belly swallowed, rubbing the thick skin of his throat, though Wufei hadn't put a scratch on him. "She mainly fixes for Dai Yan Gao's lot and for Ravachol. Sometimes for Manneti."
"Which one would be most likely to be dealing with L2-X953?" Duo asked, face suddenly unreadable.

"That one? The Nine with the riots? Er, don't know for sure, prob'ly Ravachol's lot."

"Rav. Great." Duo smiled. To Wufei's eyes, it looked slightly forced. "Well, tell Theodora that I dropped by, 'kay? My name is Duo Maxwell. Sweeper Howard can vouch for me. So can Ravachol, for that matter."

Pot-Belly's eyes bulged again. "Oh," he said weakly.

"I'll be in this sector for the next few hours. I'm sure she can find me. You take care now." Duo waggled his fingers in a mocking little goodbye gesture and turned away without looking back at Wufei.

Wufei hesitated. The crossbow was still loaded on the counter and he wasn't sure how to release the catch without firing it....Duo was nearly at the door, he had to move quickly. Wufei plucked the bolt out of the cradle, spun it around in his hand and stabbed it deep into the counter in front of Pot-Belly, who still hadn't moved away from the far wall. Pot-Belly looked suitably impressed and intimidated. Mission accomplished, Wufei thought sourly, sheathing his sword and following Duo out the door.

He caught sight of the black coat disappearing around the corner of the warehouse and he ran to keep up, but it turned out Duo was waiting for him halfway down the alleyway, out of sight of the shop's door. They were between the warehouse and a building; no windows gave out onto their tiny alley, no chance of being overheard. Duo glanced over Wufei's shoulder anyway, and then ran an eye up and down the Preventer's frame. He looked like he was taking stock of Wufei all over again.

"That was pretty impressive," he drawled.

A compliment from Duo Maxwell. If it hadn't been about his ability to correctly threaten some small-time fence or smuggler, Wufei might have actually appreciated it a smidgeon. As it were, both action and approval left a bitter taste in his mouth, as did Duo's slight hesitation before he'd given Wufei his cue earlier. Duo hadn't been sure he'd catch it or know what to do with it.

"Glad I was able to surpass whatever lowly expectations you had of me."

Duo didn't deny it, neither did he show an ounce of discomfiture. "Cool your jets, pilot. Look at it from my point of view. Last time we met, you weren't exactly the sneakiest or most spontaneous one of us. If you'd asked me twenty four hours ago, I'd have said you'd stand out in Freeport like a streaker in a nunnery."

"That was five years ago," Wufei objected, since he couldn't very well deny it. "I've done a lot of undercover work since then."

"Yeah, and I bet you hated every minute of it," Duo said with a smile that slipped right past Wufei's shell and opened him up like a clam. He couldn't deny that either.

"Whether I like it or not is irrelevant. I am a disciplined, well-trained investigator and I can compromise for the good of the mission. I'm not a loose cannon, L-" Wufei interrupted himself and glared at the jagged edges of a broken manhole cover near their feet. His harsh, angry words seemed to be bouncing around the walls still, or maybe they were just circling inside his head.

When Duo said nothing, Wufei glanced up, prickly and hostile. Duo had tilted his head slightly, eyes on Wufei's face. "Loose cannon? I never said that." He sounded curious instead of angry. "Sure, I'm pretty surprised that you adapted damn well in an environment that's gotta be pretty alien to you. But
all I did was pat you on the back. You did good. I certainly didn't say-"

"Thanks," Wufei grunted. "Did we actually learn anything from that individual back there?"

"Who says you're a loose cannon?" Duo probed, ignoring the attempt to change the subject.

"Nobody. Just forget it."

Duo stared at him, but finally shrugged, dismissing the matter.

"So you've done some undercover stuff. Anything big? You any good at worming your way into organized crime? Spend months undercover to-"

"No," Wufei admitted, disgruntled. "Trowa or Sally takes care of those cases. They send me on short-term missions to infiltrate or break into terrorist hideouts, so that when the assault starts I'm in position and ready to take out the leaders."

Duo's lips twitched. "What you mean is, you play the part of a mean, arrogant son of a bitch for a few hours until you can bully or bullshit your way into the joint and then shoot everybody?"

"That is not-"

"But that's great! Go with your strengths. And that'll certainly help you be a good Blade. As long as you can keep it up for a few weeks instead of just a few hours, I'm feeling a lot more confident about surviving our mission together." Duo was striding out towards the distant mouth of the alley.

"Maxwell, I said that wasn't what I-" Actually that wasn't too bad a description of most of his undercover work, but he didn't want to admit it.

"Hey, as long as you can pull that attitude and cope with the urge to arrest all the scurvy criminal elements around you, I'm happy! Come on, Chang, let's go grab something to eat. Those N-bars couldn't fill a hole in my tooth, and the afternoon is going to be busy. We need the energy."

Wufei followed him, trying not to stomp. After five years of it, he should be used to people assuming he couldn't handle anything that required finesse or cooperation. Especially since he used that reputation to his advantage when the situation required someone who could be blunt and wasn't afraid of the consequences. It just annoyed him when the fools assumed he'd compromise a mission for- but Duo was right. Based on what he knew of Wufei five years ago, when he'd not been the most flexible of the five pilots, the smuggler's assumption that he couldn't stay undercover in Freeport was probably justified. Duo had appeared rather puzzled at his outburst...Apparently, Heero had never told Duo the 'highlights' of Wufei's career. That was good. Duo's change of attitude after Wufei had handled Pot-belly was even better. Maybe his informant would stop second-guessing his abilities now.

One thing was sure: Wufei was never going to tell Duo just how he 'coped' with rubbing shoulders with the criminals he couldn't arrest. That was something private. Wufei had seen things in Neo-Tokyo's wasteland of neon, broken lives and black streets which he'd wanted to correct and had to ignore for the imperatives of his investigation. Unlike Heero, he couldn't switch off the part of himself that was angry at what he saw for the sake of his mission.

So Wufei watched. He witnessed. Every petty criminal, every sordid crime, every pimp, every drug-pusher. Every corrupt politician, every untouchable businessman. He remembered them. So that if fate and fortune smiled upon him in the future and he was in a position where he could do something about them, he would recognize them, and ensure that justice was done. If that opportunity never came, then it wouldn't be his failing, it would be destiny's. And even if he was almost guaranteed
never to bring them to justice, it just seemed important to him that someone, somewhere, had witnessed their crimes and knew them for who they really were, pitiful parasites living off other men. As if his gaze could somehow ensure that karma was met, their crimes eventually punished because they could not be ignored by everybody.

He was aware that this was the height of arrogance and maybe even vanity to think his judgment mattered on such a cosmic scale; which is why he'd be tortured with a red-hot poker before admitting any of this to Maxwell. The smuggler would laugh for a week.
While Wufei mulled over his thoughts of justice and his rigid personal code, Duo hesitated at a crossroads, playing with the end of his braid and looking up and down the harshly lit metal streets. He finally hailed someone sitting on a stoop nearby, reading under the harsh flood of neon overhead. "Hey, docker, any place around here I can score some Chinese food?"

The man looked up from his newspaper. Actual newsprint on actual paper; an intriguing archaism, though the layout was the kind cheaply run out on a printer and the paper was so recycled it looked like a well-used rag that had been strategically flattened.

"Chinese food?" The man looked Duo over carefully, then Wufei. Apparently this intense scrutiny was the norm in Freeport. It never ceased to surprise Wufei; in the slums and war zones, people kept their head down and never made eye contact if they could help it.

"You can try Hyun," the man finally said. His eyes lingered on Duo's coat, on Wufei's collar. "She'll be cooking for the shift that just ended. She's over thataway. Two streets down, left, go straight for something like five streets, hit the Che lock road, house with a blue door, first floor."

"Thanks," Duo answered with a wave and a grin. The man nodded in return. His paper hung loose in his hands. Wufei felt his eyes on their backs until they turned the corner.

Duo managed to follow the man's instructions as if they'd been accompanied by an accurate map. A few feet from the blue door, Wufei knew they'd found the place. The distinct smell of fermented cabbage and radish, broth, fish bouillon and spices competed with Freeport's ambient aroma. Duo knocked summarily and went right in.

They were in someone's hallway, and Wufei began to back out again, assuming this was a mistake. But Duo walked straight on, following his nose to the kitchen. Wufei perforce had to follow him past rows of kid's shoes, bags, coats, jackets and hard hats.

The kitchen alone was as big as Duo's room, with a big cooker on which several massive pots
boiled. A long table with a bench on either side hosted six people, all men, two of them of Asian descent. They were eating out of cheap plastic bowls, or they were until Duo entered. They, like the small woman who'd been tending the pots, were now staring at the two newcomers. Wufei had to force himself not to retreat in confusion, certain that they were invading someone's private home.

"Hi!" Duo said brightly to the woman. His right hand flickered briefly up to his head in a small salute, a gesture Wufei had seen several times this morning in the crowds of workers going home; it was apparently a local greeting. It looked like the 'all clear' signal people used in space-suits when comms were down.

The woman looked to be in her late fifties, dressed in a long white house coat with a mandarin collar. Her hair was cropped short, very black against her almond-pale skin. Sloe eyes were sharp and inquisitive in a nest of wrinkles. She had her hands on her hips, one of them holding a pair of long cooking chopsticks. The pose accentuated her stocky figure.

"I'm Hyun Ho-Dai," she said abruptly in accented Standard. "You are?"

"Duo Maxwell from Makhno sector, at your service," Duo answered, his voice polite and his usual cheeky grin fully in place. There wasn't a woman alive who'd resist those big blue eyes and roguish charm for more than three milliseconds; that unwanted and inappropriate thought popped unbidden into Wufei's mind, much to his annoyance. His sudden frown caught Hyun's attention and she examined him in turn.

"Someone mentioned your excellent cooking," Duo continued warmly. "And my friend and I haven't eaten anything more than N-bars in the past twenty-four hours. Do you have room for a couple more for lunch? Smells wonderful."

At the table, the men had continued with their meal. Hyun stood there with her hands on her hips. She glanced over Duo, then once again at Wufei. She stared at his face for a few long seconds, and then nodded abruptly. "Can't leave you boys hungry," she said, turning back to her stove. She grabbed some plastic bowls, and skilfully used the sticks to scoop some noodles into them. Then she took some bigger bowls from a stack near the stove and used a ladle to serve two portions of stew. Fish stew with kimchi, Wufei guessed from the smell.

She plunked the bowls down on the counter nearby and nodded at them. "Condiments here. Chopsticks, spoons and forks." The utensils were plastic, in a basket next to spices and soy sauce.

Duo nodded gracefully and thanked her in broken Cantonese. Wufei winced; the woman's appearance, name and cooking were all Korean. Hyun Ho-Dai looked neither surprised nor offended however as she murmured a polite reply in the same language.

"You can eat at the table or in the courtyard," she added, turning back to the stove.

"Oh we'll sit in the courtyard, it's such a beautiful day today."

At the table, one man chuckled in his bowl. The woman went 'humph!' and shot the joker a glare over her shoulder, but her lips were twitching.

Wufei took his two bowls and a set of chopsticks and followed Duo out to the courtyard, walking through what was apparently the woman's house. Two doors were closed. Behind a partially opened third two young children sat on a bed, poring over a book. From the number of small beds in the crowded room, Hyun was either extremely fecund or several families lived here.

The courtyard was an enclosed area with a few sheets and clothes drying on a line and kid's toys
scattered here and there. A long bench at the back against the wall was the only place to sit. Duo set his bowls down and straddled it, using it as both seat and table. Wufei imitated him, facing his Handler.

"Nice place, this, gotta remember it," Duo said, and sniffed the kimchi. "Is this actually Chinese?"

"No."

"Oh." Behind his usual carefree expression, Duo seemed a little disappointed. He wasn't looking at Wufei, stirring the bowl with his fork.

"It looks good." Wufei stuck his sticks in the stew, but paused as a sudden odd thought crossed his mind: that Duo had wanted to go to a Chinese eatery as some kind of peace offering, a small gesture of apology for his earlier doubts. Wufei wasn't sure of it though, and even if that were the case, he wasn't sure what it was he should say, if anything, in return. He took a bite of the stew, dismissing the thought. It wasn't too bad; the fish balls were the frozen, reconstituted variety and there was a small aftertaste to the broth that made him think of the local water, but it was hearty and spicy, and the kimchi tasted like it had been homemade with care.

Duo tucked in with gusto as well, and they were silent for a few seconds, until something else occurred to Wufei; a thought that had been hovering at the edge of his mind, trying to catch his attention. A fish ball slipped from his chopsticks with a small splash as he realized-

"Did you pay for this?"

Duo blinked, then looked around the courtyard quickly, a cautious gesture that made Wufei tense and check their surroundings as well. The courtyard backed against an alley, and they were some distance from the three-story building and its windows.

"No," Duo finally said with a last careful look around. "That's not how it works here."

Wufei put the bowl down with a slight clunk, his fingers numb. "Did we just march into someone's kitchen and- and bum lunch off-" he couldn't even finish. Threatening some small-time crook was acceptable, according to his rather complicated personal code which had learned to make room for mission necessities. But begging food off of a respectable elderly lady...

"Oy, don't give me that look, now," Duo scolded gently, stirring some noodles in the broth. "That's just the way things work here. That's what all those other guys did."

"...She feeds people off the street for free? Just like that?"

Duo hesitated minutely. "Pretty much."

Wufei didn't like that 'pretty much' and what it might cover. His glare said as much. Duo sighed. "Look, just trust me on this, okay?"

"You didn't-" Wufei interrupted himself. No, that he wouldn't believe.

"What?" Duo looked at him curiously.

"Nothing." Wufei picked up his bowl again and gathered up a small amount of the fermented cabbage.

"'Nothing' nothing. Come on. What?"
"I wouldn't eat this if I thought you'd somehow intimidated her into giving it to you," Wufei finished curtly, knowing he'd not get away with silence now that the notorious Maxwell curiosity was awakened.

"Oh yeah, she looked really intimidated," Duo snorted. "I guess that put your mind at ease."

"I just don't think you'd stoop that low," Wufei elaborated.

There'd probably been more diplomatic ways of saying that. Duo's lips twitched into a grin that was a little predatory. "Really? But you keep sayin' I'm nothin' but a petty criminal."

He sounded more amused than insulted. It probably didn't matter a damn to him what Wufei or anyone thought of him. But oddly enough, it mattered to Wufei.

"You know very well what I think of your smuggling career, Maxwell. And you're the one who chose to live in Freeport. But..." Wufei paused. How could he go about explaining the sort of lines that existed in his mind, that delineated what was right, what was wrong and what was just about acceptable?

Honesty and reserve exchanged a few heated blows, and honesty won out. He owed Duo an explanation at least.

"When I knew you five years ago, we did not fight for the same reasons. We do not have the same background and we would not make the same compromises. But you had your honor, even though it was different from mine, and this would not be something it would allow you to do." His sticks twitched, taking in the bowls.

Duo mulled that over as if it had been more than he'd bargained for. He might have just meant the whole line as a friendly exchange of insults and Wufei had missed his cue.

"Okay, but that was five years ago," Duo finally said after sucking in a noodle in a way that would have etiquette screaming in denial. "I've changed since the good old days. How do you know I don't mug old ladies as a side-job now?"

"You have changed, but you still have that honor."

"Oh yeah? How do you know?"

"I know because you're still crazy enough to help me onto Freeport just to stop Carver from...dating your sister." Discretion kept him from talking about dead children. That, and the fact that Duo wanted to pretend he didn't care too much about that aspect of the case, and Wufei was willing to let him keep that pretence. "You thrive on attacking the strong, on breaking the unbreakable. You'd find preying on the weak distasteful. And way too boring."

That last made Duo's lips twitch. He toyed with his noodles, but he was looking at Wufei through his lashes. Weighing the response. More than that. Wufei felt that Duo was trying to pierce Wufei's own pretences, look at his own reasons for being here. Maybe examine the integrity of Wufei's honor, the nature of the compromises he'd had to make these past five years. Suddenly uncomfortable with the scrutiny, Wufei lifted his bowl to finish the broth.

"I couldn't pay if I wanted to. We don't have any money in Freeport," Duo said, abruptly shelving a big, complex subject.

Wufei lowered the bowl and swallowed. "With the amount we pay you, you should have enough to buy more than a few bowls of kimchi," he muttered, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.
"All that money goes into keeping Scythe up in the air, as well as bribing people in and around the colonies, mainly for information Heero needs."

'Mainly'. That probably meant that some of those bribes furthered Duo's smuggling career. Wufei wondered if this was giving Trowa ulcers. Probably not. Trowa's notion of justice was as flexible as the times required it to be.

"So you're saying, you and everybody else on this colony are broke, so charitable women like this one decide to feed you rather than see you starve?"

"No," Duo was oddly hesitant, as if he was unsure of how much he should say. "I'm saying we don't have any currency in Freeport."

Wufei put his empty bowl down with a thump. "What?"


"What do you mean you don't have any?!

"Keep your voice down. This is one of those things that everybody here knows, so you'd look weird asking about it." Duo looked around carefully before finishing his stew in one long gulp.

"So you work on some sort of credit system? Is that why you gave her your name?" The exchange of names had felt oddly formal and more than a matter of common courtesy.

"Um, something like that. Say, that was damn good. What kinda food is this?"

"Korean. She didn't ask you for any ID though."

"I have an honest face," Duo replied, batting his eyelids, wrinkling his nose and dimpling his cheeks. For an instant he looked like a six-year-old who'd been in the cookie jar and knew you couldn't prove it. Wufei just couldn't relate this to the man in the black coat, looming over him like an interrogator, or having him attack Pot-belly just to make a point...For a very brief instant, he wondered with some concern if Duo wasn't suffering from some kind of post-traumatic personality disorder - god knew he'd have reason enough. Except that every one of Wufei's instincts, including the baffled ones, were telling him that the cheeky bastard in front of him was as mentally solid and well-balanced as a slab of Gundanium welded to the floor.

"So how does it work?" Wufei finally asked. Duo hadn't paid Chris or Madir either. Wufei assumed the smuggler had some sort of tab. But Hyun didn't know them from the next two bums on the street. "Do you have credit lines? Why not use cards and-"

"Why do you care? You're the kept man in this instance," Duo drawled. Wufei's eyebrows shot up almost to his hairline. "I mean, you don't have to pay for anything. I provide you with food, clothes and all that. It's my duty as your Handler."

"I don't want to expose myself accidentally by not knowing something so fundamental," Wufei said with another glance around.

"Well, now you know. And if you don't talk, you can't screw up. Remember?"

"Of course I remember, but I might have to address you in public, tell you something urgently-..." Wufei nearly stuttered in frustration. It just seemed wrong to be ignorant about this. It could only trip him up. "Knowledge is our greatest weapon," he bit out, falling back on the old saw of one of his childhood tutors.
"In this case, it might give you an ulcer," Duo said cryptically.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Look, all this ain't essential to your job. It's just history and traditions and stuff. Heero never gave
two shakes about it once I told him the rules and how they applied to him. If you just don't talk and
follow orders it won't trip you up, so what's the point in knowing?"

"I'm curious," Wufei snapped.

"Really? That's not a character trait that I remember from the war," Duo looked at him quizzically.
"Isn't that a hindrance to being a good lil' soldier? Can't be easy following orders when you want to
know what's behind them. That can't be popular."

"I'm not a soldier," retorted Wufei. "Before the war I was a scholar. Now I'm an investigator. I'm
paid to stick my nose where it's not wanted, ask questions, understand as much as I can and be as
unpopular as I damn well can be." His voice was dangerously close to ringing out in the small
courtyard at the end of the sentence. He bristled as Duo made shushing motions with his hands.

"Oy, calm down. Okay, so you and Heero aren't quite wired the same." Duo looked entertained, but
also somewhat curious himself. "A scholar? How the hell did you ever get mixed up in the war?"

The amused expression vanished. Duo was silent for a few heartbeats, eyes plunging into Wufei's,
and then he stared at the bowls on the bench between them.

"...I can't believe I never asked you that before."

Wufei said nothing, caught equally off-balance.

"You never shared even that much during the war," Duo said in the heavy silence that had settled
between them. "You were aggressively uninterested in anything that wasn't a target. You surprised I
never thought you could be curious? You never asked about us, either."

"Because it didn't matter." It was wrong to say that he hadn't cared why the others fought. But Duo
had never asked him, and Wufei realized that he only had the most tenuous idea of the L2 native's
own motives for fighting back then. It had taken awhile for them to even consider each other as
allies; most of the war, they'd battled alone. The longest time he'd spent with Duo had been in the
Lunar Base cell, and they'd talked exclusively about their mechas, escape and retaliation before
going each their separate way. Later they'd fought for a common goal, but they'd never discussed the
paths that had led them to it. And that was right, and sufficient; circumstances, being alone against
the might of OZ and the madness of war, had bound them together more surely than sympathy for
one another's causes ever could.

"You didn't ask me, I didn't ask you. Each one of us knew why he was there and what cause he was
going to die for, and that was all that was needed," he said. Duo was staring at his gloved fingers
playing with his fork, eyes in the past. "It was just the way it was."

"Yeah," Duo muttered. Then he shook himself. "Ah, let's not talk about that kinda shit on this nice
sunny day."

Wufei cast a pointed glance at the invisible ceiling far above their head, lost in darkness only lightly
peppered by red warning lights and the backwash of neon. Duo grinned. The darkness that existed
only between them slunk back into the past.

Duo waved his fork around like a conductor's baton. "Okay, if you're interested, I guess I can tell
you a bit about Freeport. I'm kinda curious to see how you gonna take it. Heh, I kinda wish I had my camera with me, you're gonna pull one of your scary faces when you hear this. I guess I'll start-

They both tensed and turned towards the door to the courtyard. They'd registered the steps behind it, but now a voice had made itself clear with the words 'out there?'

"-by telling you another day," Duo concluded, eyes narrowed. "If that's Theo, she's damn good at finding people quickly. As usual, let me do the talking. You just stand around and look mean. Don't attack unless I tell you-" the door opened before he could finish. They were already standing.

Wufei grunted assent, facing the woman and two men who walked into the courtyard as if they owned it.

Theodora turned out to be a heavyset woman in her mid-thirties. She looked like a working mom in her grey overalls and long knitted coat, except for the look in her eyes which spoke of knowledge used as a weapon and weapons used without hesitation. She didn't seem particularly upset at the way Duo had threatened Pot-Belly. Annoyingly enough, in Wufei's opinion, she and Duo walked a ways to the side of the courtyard and talked there for five minutes in a low voice. Wufei was left staring at the two men who accompanied her. One of them wore a Blade's collar, and Wufei felt a moment of worry, wondering if there was a way he should be behaving towards his 'colleague'. If there was, the other man gave him no indication; he just watched Wufei without particular animosity or interest while their Handlers talked. The other man was typical space-born: small, slight, and, when he started biting the fingernails of one hand, obviously polydactyl. That kind of genetic damage was common in the less respectable space colonies, and from what Wufei had seen in the crowd this morning, Freeport was no exception. The second man was dressed like a scruffy Sweeper, in pressure-suit pants and a thick ragged vinyl jacket. Maybe he was one of Theodora's freetrader friends.

The meeting ended without any drama. Theodora left with her two followers and Wufei and Duo went to wash Hyun's bowls in the sink and thank her for lunch. She gave them another piercing, weighing look, nodded regally and continued feeding the dozen or so children who were now seated at the table.

The rest of the day followed the same pattern. Duo met with other people, most of them in their homes, seated behind their carts of merchandise or working in shops like Pot-Belly's. Wufei gathered from those conversations he overheard that these people were fixers, small-time smugglers or informants. Most of them seemed to have decent, normal jobs in Freeport with no signs they indulged in a criminal career on the side. Not for the first time, Wufei measured the importance of Duo's status as his informant. The Preventer wouldn't have known where to start.

Duo played his part admirably. He never told a downright lie, but his half-truths sounded very convincing. With just a few words and sheer attitude, he let it be understood that he'd been contacted by a new 'customer' who wanted some 'fragile cargo' delivered to the colonies - he meant explosives, Wufei gathered after a few half-worded conversations. When it came to buying, making and handling bombs, it was obvious to any of their listeners that Duo was an expert. He also showed a good grasp of his potential clientele; the names and organisations he mentioned was the information Wufei had given him a few hours ago, the list of those who'd been arrested or who were still at large, and the names of their political movements.
Every detail and name he dropped solidified his cover story and confirmed Duo's status as a smuggler who knew this route, who would be trusted by a customer to make the run. The smuggler would then heap elaborate curses on the Preventers, particularly the 'fucking Specials pigs' who'd gone and killed or arrested all of Duo's potential customers and screwed up his intended trade-route. Now he was looking for another way in and some uncompromised business outlets; he'd even be ready to cut another freetrader in on the deal if he had to. Someone who could bring guns and explosives in to L2-X953, and then smuggle one or two of Duo's terrorist friends out again to get them away from the heat.

After several hours and numerous conversations, Wufei was getting the hang of Duo's methods, of the way Freeport operated and how they would go about finding Carver among eighty thousand souls, most of whom were wanted by the law and didn't much trust anybody even within the colony. The Preventer had also picked up new faces for his mental 'wanted list', and memorized a good deal of information about certain terrorist and gun-running networks he was going to have a pleasure investigating once he got out of Freeport.

"Don't get a hard-on for all that info you heard today," Duo muttered as they rested for a bit on a park bench. They'd been walking for over eight hours, visiting several sectors, doubling back repeatedly when the person they needed to speak to wasn't in, forcing the pair to return later at the end of a shift or after their intended informant got out of bed.

Wufei had been staring blindly at a jungle-gym the local urchins were making good use of. He'd actually not been thinking about the information he'd collected; the fatigue of the previous weeks still lurked on the edges of his reserves. He'd been watching the children's acrobatics and roughhousing, and idly wondering when was the last time he'd seen kids play like that. In the world outside of Freeport, children played with online educational programs and computer games, or watched TV...except in the slums where they played with needles and guns.

"What? All that stuff about terrorist cells and the gun-trade?" he asked, finally figuring out what info Duo was talking about. "I can use this information without compromising your position."

"That's not the point. Most of that stuff is out of date now, and the rest will be obsolete by the time you get out of Freeport. The guys we're talking to, they're small-time fixers, wankers trying to impress me. They're hoping if they can flash what looks like important info, then I'll use them to get to the big boys, give them the credit of having provided a business opportunity. They toss around names and data to impress me, but it's third hand if that."

"Why are we talking to them?"

Duo sighed and rubbed his neck. He'd thrown off the coat despite the cold, and it was almost as if he'd thrown off the persona as well, letting his weariness show through. "It's necessary. I don't know the Black Nines run that well. I got a few contacts, but I can't afford to get them into this Carver mess in case it goes sour. Besides, it's a different league. None of my buddies - or me - run guns, drugs or people. Well, I might run people, but I wouldn't run a shit like Carver."

"You're trying to find the people who got Carver off-colony despite martial law, right? By finding the people who might deal with that kind of smuggling?"

"Yup. Knew you were bright." Duo gave him a tired smile. He slipped a liquorice stick from an inner pocket of his discarded coat and stuck it in his mouth. His next words were slurred around it. "You gotta realize, it's going to take awhile. Information is like gold dust in Freeport, 'specially among scissormen and freetraders. I'll take time to find out who runs that route, sniff around them, see if I can find out more about who Carver is, who his friends are...that'll lead me to where he'll be staying."
"Would they know? What if he just gave them a wad of cash to carry him in without questions asked?"

"They'll know. Some of these traders would run their own mother to a slaving ring for the right amount, but they would not bring anybody into Freeport unless they knew enough about him to pass muster. They ain't suicidal, not at any price."

"If you say so..." Wufei thought this sounded a bit too reliant on some kind of Freeport inviolability, but he remembered that Duo had told him the same thing about smuggling guns aboard. So far that had proven true. There were things about this place he wasn't sure he understood.

A kid screamed and chased another around the twisted iron in the centre of the playground. Then they went to investigate a nearby junkyard. Trust kids to be more interested in a broken-down stove than their designated recreations. A passerby chased them away and back to the jungle gym with a few barked words. The kids made terrible faces at his back, and then started throwing junk at the twisted metal of the jungle gym to pass the time.

Wufei watched the man through his lashes as the latter passed their bench. The brute was armed, a short saber slung low on his hip with the scabbard tied to his leg. Five feet nine inches give or take, unshaven, thick features, a chain dangling from his nose to a piercing in his nipple revealed by a hole in his shirt. Over the shirt he wore a thick jacket, practically body armor. What had really caught Wufei's attention was the insignia painted on the back of the jacket when the man had turned to scold the children: a black fist on a red circle. The Mano, a notorious pirate gang. Wufei automatically etched the man's features into his 'guilty' list, while feeling somewhat incredulous that the bastard was walking around with what came down to a Jolly Roger on his back. And nobody was giving him a second glance.

"So what do we know?" Wufei dragged his attention back to the case. He could get very, very distracted if he let himself, but Carver had to be his first priority. "From what those fixers were saying, the smugglers most likely to have gotten Carver out of X953 will work for this Ravachol, correct?"

"Ravachol," Duo corrected his pronunciation. "Frank Ravachol. Not that that's his real name either way."

"You know him then," Wufei stated without surprise.

"I knew him at one point," Duo admitted. His eyelids had drooped shut, the liquorice hung from his lips until he removed the stick with a tired gesture. "Not that well, mind you. Before and during the war. I don't deal with him now though. Don't get me wrong, there's worse out there. We could have done a lot worse than end up having to do this dance with Rav and his gang. But I don't like dealing with him."

"Why?"

"He runs shit. Bad drugs. Big time." Duo's fingers tightened over the stick. "And I don't like his attitude. It's just stuff. Forget about it. There's no bad blood between us, at least not that I'm aware of. If we end up having to deal with him, it won't be a problem. But we shouldn't need to. What we need to know is peanuts to him. Just the name of one of his ships, the details on one of their runs, info on one of their customers...he won't give a shit. It's just finding out what we need to know that's gonna be hard. And then tracking Carver from there."

Duo stood up slowly and stretched, then he looped the coat over his arm.
"Come on, let's head home. I need to check a few of my sources in Makh. I got a couple of friends sounding out the hitman side of things. I dunno if Carver drums up his business here, he might use fixers to put him in touch with potential clients on the outside, in which case somebody knows about him. It's harder to check though, not my stomping ground. And besides, assassins tend to watch their six. Asking too many questions about Carver directly will just spook him. Man, my throat is sore and my head aches. I've been talking too much."

"This may be a sign of the end of the world."

"Shut up, Hound." Duo sighed and shook himself. "I'm up for dinner and an early bed. I've got some frozen stuff...or the Saints have forsaken us and we'll have to face Babka's borsch when we get home."

"Who is this Babka you keep mentioning?"

"She's my neighbor. Sweet elderly lady, around seventy. Makes food that has the angels weeping in despair."

"...I think we've met."
Chapter 7

Outside the ground at Luton Town
A crazy opportunist has sprayed upon a wall
A simple proclamation for all to read
"Revolution is a better game than football"
---Chumbawumba, 'Hmmm'

Wufei woke to a whining sound, a piece of metal complaining about being forcibly introduced to another piece of metal it didn't particularly care for. He lifted his head to stare blearily at the workbench.

"S'it time t' get up?" he mumbled.

"Only if you want to." This was the Duo who'd picked him up in Scythe, Wufei thought, still muddled from sleep. The trench coat was nowhere to be seen, just grey cargo pants, woolly blue slippers and thick protective vest, gloves and goggles. He was working on the Aries stabilizer unit with a small wrench in one hand and a set of long pincers in the other, the tools moving like a surgeon's scalpel. Wufei noted in passing that Duo held the pincers in the right hand with his three good fingers and the wrench in what should have been his weaker left hand. After two years of using it, it probably wasn't the weaker now.

"I told you I had something to do today, right?" Duo tossed over his shoulder. "Well, this is it. Gotta fix this. Will probably take me awhile. Son of a bitch. Jesus Christ, they expect me to work miracles."

Wufei struggled to sit up, still dozy. He'd slept five hours according to his watch, which should be enough. It wasn't as if he'd done any strenuous activity yesterday. But he'd been running on the tail end of his reserves for two weeks or more now. The relative lack of adrenaline the day before had given his body the idea that now was the perfect time to rest and recuperate, and it didn't seem eager to listen to any opinion to the contrary.

"But we need to track Carver," he muttered to Duo and to his own sleep-fogged brain.

"Don't worry about it." Duo swiveled around in the chair and slid the safety goggles up on his forehead. They left light red panda-like marks around his eyes, which Wufei found rather cute in his muddled, vulnerable state until he caught himself. "We did most of the preliminary work yesterday. Now we gotta let things simmer. There's not much more we could do right now. Why don't you go back to sleep? You know, I didn't want to say anything, but I thought you were looking a little peaky when I picked you up at Hilde's. Doesn't Une take care of you? Feed you right? Tuck you into bed at ten?"

"Screw you, Maxwell..." Wufei stifled a yawn and sank back into the pillow. Wasn't much he could do on his own... might as well recuperate... assuming he could sleep with Duo working in the same room...

Oddly enough, he could. He found himself drifting off to sleep listening to the strangely familiar sound of grumbled profanities as Duo hammered away at a suit part. They could have been back on Peacemillion, catching a few hasty hours of rest before the next wave of mobile dolls attacked...
Unfortunately Duo's last teasing words had more influence than those five-year-old memories. Wufei sunk into a heavy, sticky sleep full of weird dreams where a larger-than-life Une was trying to mother him. She was threatening to spoon-feed him the rice soup if he refused to eat it when-

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph! Whadya want, you stupid piece of junk! Blood?!"

Wufei shot half out of the sleeping bag. His sword had sprung its scabbard before his eyes were fully open.

"Ooops, sorry man, did I wake you?"

"Did- who- did you just shout?" Wufei spluttered, looking around wildly for any attackers.

"Yeah. This damned pile of shit just won't play ball. I think Monique can kiss this one goodbye."

Duo heaved a disgusted sigh and prodded the stabilizer with a wrench as if it were a small animal ready to bite.

Wufei sheathed his sword and glanced at the time. Two hours had elapsed since he'd woken up the first time. He doubted he'd be able to get back to sleep now. Remembering the dream he'd been having, he wasn't sure he wanted to.

"Whaddy want to eat, Wu? I could use a break." Duo's aggrieved expression brightened up. "I know! I got some frozen pizza rations. Okay, they're a bit manky when you use the microwave to-

"Energy bar," Wufei muttered, rubbing his face.

"Those are kinda light. And I won't have time to take you out to dinner later, I've got another piece to fix after this one. Hmm, there's those little cake things I've got squirreled away. They last forever, they're chockfull of recombinant protein, calories and preservatives, and I find the sugar rush keeps me going for-

"N-bars."

"Or I have a portion of borscht in the freezer that I really need to eat at some point, Babka wants her bowl back-

"Just give me the damn N-bars, Maxwell!"

"They're in that cabinet over there. Oh, and let me introduce you to a nice bloke called Mr Coffee. I think you two need to get acquainted, like, now."

There was something about Freeport that made Wufei feel perpetually grimy. He showered for longer this time and without any further incident, but the feeling didn't go away. It was as if the smell of chemicals and the seedy casual violence were an oily residue on his skin that the cheap soap/shampoo couldn't remove. He wasn't in the best of moods when he returned to Duo's room.

Duo was still in his chair, feet on the table, sipping a cup of coffee and eating one of the creamy sugary chemical cake things he'd mentioned. The sight brought back a lot of war memories. Wufei shuddered and concentrated on the cup of bitter coffee on the workbench next to the other swivel chair.

"Are you sure there's nothing we can do today?" he growled into his cup.

"Positive," Duo answered with a long-suffering roll of the eyes. "Look Wufei, it's crucial that I don't attract suspicion. I'm a freetrader, okay? I have the credentials. But a canny guy like me doesn't start
on a new trade route without shitloads of information and months of preparation-

"Months?!” Wufei coughed, choking on coffee.

"It'd take months for me to set up a steady supply run of weapons to the X9 colonies, yeah. But I'm not actually going through with it, remember? I should have the information I need on Carver long before that. As long as nobody gets suspicious." Duo underscored the last word by tapping his fingers on the workbench. The prosthetics made a dull clicking sound through the glove's material.

"Couple of weeks and then I should have the names and an introduction to the few moon-cursers who would have the balls to run Carver out. Then we're good. But I have to play it cool until we get the info. I can't move any faster or do anything differently than if I were setting up a route. Once I know who ran Carver in, I'll continue to work on the cover story for awhile. I'm sorry if this gives you ulcers, my friend, but that's the way it is. After a few days, I'll let it be known that the deal fell through and that I don't need the route after all. By then we'll be hunting for Carver properly."

"Assuming he's not left to go and kill someone else," Wufei ground out.

"Que sera, sera, Chang. Just remember, the riots and the arrests probably screwed up Carver's contacts too. He'll take his time to re-establish himself if he's aiming to return anywhere in L2."

"If. He also worked on L3 and Earth before L2."

"Fuck, what am I, Saint Maxwell, patron of lost causes? Why does everybody expect miracles outta me?" Duo threw up his hands dramatically before swallowing another cake-thing whole. His voice was slightly muffled as he continued. "We'll find out who he is, Chang, who he works for outside, where he's headed, who his pals are. If we don't get him this time, I'll be here waiting for him when he gets back, and I'll make sure Trowa knows when he leaves again and where he's headed. Then you can go and pick him like a daisy."

"What if he doesn't come back here? What if this is our only chance?" Carver's future victims were shedding blood in Wufei's mind. It infuriated him that Duo could be so flippant about it.

"No, he'll be back. This is his home." Duo was looking at the stabilizer again as if trying to drill through it with his glare. "He's a citizen, I'm sure. I told you, an outsider can't bribe his way in."

"I did," Wufei muttered.

That got him a blank look that nonetheless packed a punch. "You're not fully in, Chang. If you think you are, why don't you take off that collar and go hunt for Carver yourself? I'll bet Scythe you don't get further than three sectors."

"Why couldn't I - or Carver - pretend to be someone who just landed?" Wufei countered. Duo was supposed to be the specialist here, but Wufei just couldn't take his word for this. In the Preventer's view of the world, Freeport was a sink of vices; criminals hid out here all the time, smugglers, pirates, terrorists, gun-runners, drug-dealers... A hitman was nothing new. "Enough money to bribe people to."

"No currency," Duo reminded him sweetly.

"...credit or whatever," Wufei muttered, though admittedly if Freeport had its own credit system, that did put a brake on what a newcomer could do.

"The only way Carver could hide around here without actually being known in Freeport is if he's in quarantine, but I got that covered. I sent a message to someone who has the power to check that."
"You mentioned this quarantine before."

Duo was working on the stabilizer again, plugging a voltmeter into a socket. "Yeah. Anybody can live in Freeport, but they have to go through quarantine first."

"Everybody? But didn't you say the thing lasted a whole year?"

"Yeah. Migrants have to work in the mines on the resource satellites or in the shipyards for a year. Or on a Sweeper ship as a gunny and swab. They can't set foot in Freeport otherwise. During that time, they're fed and clothed and they're given a few books and movies, and they work fifteen hours a day. Back-breaking hard work, the most boring, repetitious stuff."

"Cheap labor," Wufei said, disgusted. This was the Freeport slavery he'd heard about then. Though he'd not realized it was limited in time. "It only lasts a year?" A new thought struck him and he examined Duo's profile more closely. "Did you do this?"

"Yes to both questions. In theory I didn't need to. I could have migrated after my time aboard with the Sweepers, swabbing for them before the war. Howard himself said he'd vouch for me. But..." Duo shrugged. It was a simple movement. It spoke of someone who never took the easy way out. "So yeah, I worked on the shipyards. Started there six months after the war. It's as fucking hard as you've heard. Freeport saves on expensive tools and maintenance by using the quarantined instead of automated machinery. It's sweaty work."

"Why do people go through with this?"

"Why do people come to Freeport in the first place?" Duo countered. "Because they've fallen about as low as you can go, through the cracks you guys outside pretend don't exist any more, and they don't have a fucking choice. And just so you know, we have almost as many migrants now as we did under the Alliance."

"And Freeport abuses this, forces them to work."

"People have to work in Freeport anyway." Duo's eyes were still on the stabilizer, but he wasn't reading the voltmeter's output. "This just gives them a foretaste of what they're in for. If they can't stand a year of it, then they won't be able to stand living in Freeport anyway. But we don't give up on people. Not like you guys do." Wufei stiffened in his chair. "If they need a break, if they crack and disappear from quarantine for a few months, no problem. They're credited with the time they've already spent. If they come back, they only have to work the rest of their year. We also have a detox unit if they're hooked on something, and a psych ward if they need that. They'll always have a second chance here, but they have to work for it. They have to work for themselves. If they can't do that, then they're already dead meat, they just haven't found their place to die yet."

Wufei stared at his one-time ally. He was surprised that Duo, who preferred things fast and loud, deadly and immediate, would put up with a year of boring labor. It was even stranger that he seemed perfectly convinced that this was a good thing. That didn't jibe with the man Wufei remembered. Why had Duo come here? This was more than just a hideout and a smuggler's way-point. Why would anybody accept what came down to one year of penal labor, only to be able to enter a colony where they'd be at the mercy of pirates and gangs and exploited by the ship yards while putting up with abysmal living conditions?

"Stop thinking, Chang. It's making my head hurt all the way over here," Duo grumbled. He'd connected the stabilizer's input sockets to the ports of a battered old laptop and was hammering away at the keys.
"Why did-"

"And stop asking me questions. I have to finish this."

"Why?"

"Huh?"

"What exactly are you working on, for whom, and how much are you being paid? Or credited or whatever."

"Why do you give a shit?" Duo asked with a hint of irritation as he glared at some unsatisfactory results on the screen.

Because it's interfering with our hunt for Carver, was what Wufei wanted to say. He wasn't entirely persuaded that Duo had been forthright when he'd said they couldn't advance the investigation today. Surely there was some other avenue to explore. But if Wufei said that, it'd start a fight. The camaraderie they'd established yesterday was strained; their talk of the quarantine had been a blunt reminder that Duo was 'in' the system and Wufei was definitely 'out'.

"I'm curious. I'm trying to understand how things work here," Wufei extemporized, and then realized that this was also true.

Duo grumbled something under his breath, then he said: "The stabilizer is for one of the shipyard construction mechas. Monique Desjean asked me to fix it for her. I said okay. She needs this and another piece fixed by tomorrow. I lost time coming to pick your ass up at Hilde's, so now I'm in a hurry. I'm not getting paid. Is that all you wanted to know?"

"You're not getting paid?" Wufei stared at him. "Why are you doing it then?"

Duo's lips twisted sardonically, as if he'd expected Wufei to ask that. "Out of the goodness of my heart. Go and make yourself some more coffee. I need to-"

"Why do you have to work on it so urgently if you're not getting paid for it?"

Duo carefully put down the wrench and turned towards him, shoving up his goggles. He smiled, hard and cold. "Because I gave her my word, Chang. It happens to be as important to me as it is to you. That's... just the way things work here."

"And what am I supposed to do in the meantime?" Wufei asked, not particularly intimidated by Duo's flash of irritation.

Duo looked like he was busy sorting through a few really good suggestions of what Wufei could do in the meantime. When he finally spoke, his voice was acerbic. "Clean up the place. Help me out. You're supposed to be my Hound, after all. Heero used to work on programs while we had downtime. He rewrote my security network and stuff."

"Computers aren't my forte," Wufei admitted shortly.

"I need the laptop anyway. I know, you can go and clean up the yard. Nobody's done it since Heero was here last.\" Duo smiled like a shark, visibly amused at having two of the Preventers' top Special Agents pick up his garbage at regular intervals.

Maxwell had to be bloody amazing in bed for Heero to put up with this. That crude and discomforting thought skittered through the back of Wufei's mind before he could stop it. The surge
of self-directed annoyance didn't do anything for his temper.

Cleaning out the yard was probably the best thing he could do at this juncture. He didn't trust himself to open his mouth.

Wufei hunted around at the side of the door until he found a switch. It turned on two floodlights on either side of the yard, giving him a better look at the place. It was full of junk, was his first impression, and his lips thinned angrily at the thought that it could well take him days to clean this lot up. Then a second glance corrected that first estimate. Though some of the pieces showed superficial rust, a lot of it looked like it was still functional, and the heaps were ordered. One contained bits and pieces of a construction mecha, another, truck parts. Pieces of rubber and plastic had been heaped against one wall until Wufei couldn't see the top of the pile. A laser cutter and a heat shaper next to that heap suggested Duo used these as spare parts if he needed to make something. Next to that was a smaller stack of motherboards and gutted computers which he must plunder for spare circuitry. Yes, there was a deceptive order to the chaos.

The yard was a box of corrugated steel, twenty feet by thirty and two stories high. There was a high, wide roll-up door in the opposite wall that would lead out to one of Freeport's back alleys. The piles of scraps occupied two thirds of surface area, leaving an empty space to Wufei's right. Oil stains and grooves on the metal floor suggested that Duo occasionally worked on heavy machinery in this part. It was empty at present. There was a basketball hoop at one end of that section. Wufei looked at it and had a sudden flashback to the war again. That was happening a lot these days, even though he hadn't actually thought much about the war for years now.

He remembered the netless hoop Duo had made and attached to a wall in the big echoing space of the engine room in Peacemillion. Duo had challenged Heero at every opportunity, whenever Wing's pilot wasn't busy with his Gundam. When Heero blew him off, Duo would challenge Trowa. Since Peacemillion had only partial gravity, .6G in the engine room, that led to spectacular matches between the two agile pilots.

Wufei stared at the hoop, deep in memory. Duo had asked him once if he'd wanted a go. Wufei had declined. Duo had looked completely unsurprised. He had never asked again.

The memories left an acrid tang on his tongue, flickering through his mind like an old film reel fading from red to black, the monochrome of blood-soaked revenge. Battles, repairs, rest, battles, repairs, rest. Had he been rude to Duo when the pilot had challenged him to a game? Had he scorned him for indulging in a puerile pastime? He had quite a lot on his mind at the time, and enough hateful anger simmering behind his self-imposed calm to fill the vacuum of space, so he wouldn't be surprised if he he'd been rude. Wufei found himself beneath the hoop, staring up at the circle, trying to remember. It seemed important that he remember. Now that he thought back on it, he recalled how he'd merely shaken his head and walked away. The game was a good form of exercise and a way for the others to relieve stress, but it had gone without saying he'd needed neither and had no wish to join in the fun. The notion had been too alien to him, caught between battle and mourning.

He shook his head abruptly. Enough woolgathering. The war was over and he had a yard to clean.

There were pieces scattered between the piles that probably needed putting away, and triage would consign some of them to a bin. Paper, cardboard and foam from the scraps had scattered throughout
the yard, clinging to the floor, dried up and shriveled black in oil stains, gathering in corners like overgrown and battle-hardened dust bunnies. Wufei looked around, spotted a broom and a garbage can near the door, and got to work.

The trash was swept and picked up fairly quickly. That done, Wufei started sorting through the bits and pieces of machinery and materials that had been dumped in corners or between piles, waiting to be put away or discarded. He did what he could, but he wasn't sure in a lot of instances what was junk and what wasn't. Duo had previously saved in his piles bits and pieces that Wufei would have tossed away without a second thought. His one-time ally was a bit cross with him already this morning, no need to provoke him further by throwing away something useful.

Once the yard was in some form of order, he went to get a drink of filtered water from the bottle in the fridge. Duo was still sitting at the workbench, glaring at the recalcitrant stabilizer as if he felt like reminding it why they once called him Shinigami. Wufei examined the half-dismantled piece over Duo's shoulders and didn't think he could make a difference. He didn't have Duo's skills with mechanics, and it looked like a one-man job anyway. There wasn't much more Wufei could do around the yard or the room. Maybe go out in the back to meditate...? He didn't like feeling so useless. He wanted to do something to further his investigation.

"Do you need me for anything? Would it be a problem if I go for a walk around the sector?"

Duo started slightly and turned towards Wufei as if he'd forgotten the latter was there. Give Duo a mechanical puzzle and he had Yuy's mission-mode single-mindedness. Blue eyes blinked at Wufei from behind the goggles. "Huh?"

"I'm wearing my collar," Wufei added, tugging sourly at the thing. "If you don't need me for anything, I think I'll go out."

"Wufei...that's rather dangerous." Duo swiveled towards him and pushed up his goggles.

"Why? Don't you send your 'Hound' out to fetch things from time to time? If you tell me where to go, I can pick up dinner and save us from microwaved pizza. Oh, except I can't talk." Dammit.

"You don't get it. You're not my go-fer, Wufei. You're my right hand. And right hands don't wander around without the rest of the body in tow. Just find something...here, I finished with the laptop. Heero always has fun with that."

"I'm not Heero."

"Ah, right. I suppose he's the only one who can spend quality time visiting a laptop. Well..." Duo looked hesitant. "You're not supposed to wander around without me, but you can walk a few blocks."

"Why are we attached at the hip?" Wufei asked, annoyance starting to sizzle.

"Because I told you, I'm responsible for you. I'm the reason you're not in quarantine. People see a Blade wander around without his Handler nearby, they'll assume you're some kind of rat who snuck into Freeport, stuck a collar around his neck and is walking around under the nifty excuse that he can't answer any questions."

Which hit uncomfortably close to home.

"Gossiping is the Freeport number one competitive sport," Duo added with a wry grin. "So most people this side of Makh know you're my new Blade. Hell, they probably know what size underwear you have on. You should be safe. Don't go any further than a few blocks, though. Here."
Duo leaned over, picked up a stray piece of cardboard and scribbled a few words on it with a leaky well-chewed pen. "Take this with you. If things get ugly, show them this. They'll walk you back here and check with me."

It was Duo's name and address. Wufei glared at it. "I'm surprised I don't have a medallion on this damned collar saying 'If lost, please return me to Duo Maxwell.'"

Duo looked blank for a second and then he exploded into fits of laughter.

"What?" Wufei growled, feeling himself redden as he watched Duo nearly fall off the swivel chair.

"T-too many- too many jokes to make!! I can't even choose- oh god! Can't even choose- w-which one- to start with! Jesus! Oh, does this mean I- I have to h-house-train-"

"Give it a rest!" Wufei snapped, stuffing the piece of cardboard in his pocket and grabbing his jacket and sword. Duo was still helpless with laughter as the door slammed shut behind him.

The streets were quiet again, to Wufei's relief. Freeport's housing sections were only really busy at the start and end of shifts. He'd return to Duo's at the first few trickles of people preceding the tide. Duo's warning and precautions were ominous. Wufei didn't feel like getting lynched to the nearest lamppost by a suspicious crowd if he wandered too far. Damn, not only could he not talk, he couldn't even go further than a leash's length from his 'owner'. Duo could laugh, but Wufei certainly did feel like a damned pet at the moment.

But he wanted to get out and do something. He couldn't hunt for Carver. If only half of what Duo had told him about the suspicion he might encounter was true, he couldn't take the chance of running his own investigation. Besides, he had no idea where to start. But he could try to get a better feel for his undercover role. What he'd seen so far in Freeport, and what Duo had told him, had been confusing. It was all very well for Duo to tell him to shut up and avoid breaking his cover accidentally, but Wufei was persuaded that the more he knew about this place he was infiltrating, the better.

And there was no denying he was curious.

One source of confusion was that he'd expected they'd be tracking Carver through Freeport's red light district. Hell, he'd expected the entire colony to be one big red light district, sector after sector of brothels, drug dens and bars. Places to host the pirates returning from their looting, and to tempt them away from their earnings, like Neo-Tokyo, or the Promenade on L3-X442. Both of those were shuttle ports and cargo-holding areas with ultra-low docking fees and notoriously lax customs. They attracted the cheapest haulage companies, Sweepers cutting their profits to the barest margin, and of course pirates and smugglers. An entire fauna of parasites fed off of them and the money flowing freely into the ports. He'd assumed Freeport would put these to shame.

The sectors full of buildings, scrap yards and playgrounds defied his expectations. What kind of criminality had he actually seen? There'd been Pot-Belly, Theodora and all the smuggler scum they'd met. There'd been some thugs and pirates hanging around, though not actually doing anything illegal. He'd seen no drug users, no prostitutes - hell, he'd not even seen any winos or beggars.

But then there'd been that fight. Wufei swallowed the bitter taste as he remembered the heavy chains
biting the air, and his inability to stop them.

It hadn't been an isolated incident, either. He and Duo had witnessed another dust-up yesterday on their way back to Makh. Not anywhere as bad as the one-on-one duel, which Wufei had promptly classified as Second Degree Murder with the bystanders down for Aiding and Abetting. The second instance had just been a scrimmage between half a dozen hoodlums hanging around, more to relieve the boredom than over anything important. Wufei had been disgusted but not surprised that Duo and every other passerby had walked on without a second glance, ignoring the meaty thuds, scuffles and ragged shouts from the small plaza. It was part of the scenery, like the smell, the lack of lighting and the gaudy carts near the airlocks. Life was cheap in Freeport, playtime was rough and death was violent.

The low, rumbling rattle of a train passing shook the sector, causing him to flinch briefly. It hammered overhead as if it were trying to drive itself through the metal ceiling. Wufei had actually managed to forget the deadly ballet of ships and satellites surrounding Freeport this morning, but he was remembering them now. The sound rose to a crescendo, then faded. Freeport's usual background noise came back to the fore: pipes groaned beneath his feet, lights buzzed, a dog barked at the last echoes of the train, feral cats yowled from a nearby junkyard. Someone was singing a block away, slow and mournful. It sounded like Russian.

Wufei circled the three-block area Duo had allowed him. This left him near the airlock to Volt. He hesitated briefly, but there was no one around, so he went quickly to the airlock and checked the mechanism. It was old, hell, practically antique, but it looked well maintained and functional. That was a relief. He took a minute to decipher the sector's name above the lock. Nestor Makhno. The designation of one of the former cellblocks? Or the name of one of the old jail-birds who'd shored up the place and survived here beyond all odds? He checked the name of the other sector while he was at it. Volt was in actuality short for Voltairine de Cleyre. Huh. He wondered if Duo knew where the names came from.

There were people walking the streets in Volt and vendors sitting behind their carts. He spotted Chris's gaudy 'Candy Shop' in the distance. He prudently retreated back to Makh.

He softened and muffled the scrape of his boots as he walked, trying not to raise any echoes in the deserted streets. It felt like a ghost town after that brief glance at Volt's busier sector. No children shouted in the playground, no gossips stood at the corner, and the single lone vendor cart he saw was unattended. Because of the lack of a night/day cycle, each sector had its own rhythm based on the to and fro of shifts. This must be Makh's 'night'. Duo and he were de-synchronized by their arrival and the fact they'd been working in other sectors following different shifts. Workers would be heading home in the streets of Che or Berkman. When Makhno sector got out of bed, those other sectors would turn in. It was a handy system which kept the factories running twenty-four hours a day.

He followed the sector's wall a ways. There was graffiti everywhere, as expected. Gang signatures, elaborate and sometimes oddly elegant in their savage red, blue or yellow slashes. There were also messages chalked on the wall, with responses occasionally scribbled beneath. Wufei stopped to examine some of them more closely, intrigued.


'Alice go on a date with me! P.'
'Alice, don't go out with this loser.'
'I won't. Alice'

'Man, 5'6", red hair, nose like a potato. Going down 3 St. Any1 know him?'
'Igor Kralovka. New migrant. Check w/ Andrev Palto, 6th St and 4th, no. 140.'
'Any1 got P90 metal glue? Commissary is out. Nicole Karadan, 4-400, 3rd floor'

'CHANGE FUCKING LIGHTS 6TH ST'!!'
'Y dont u?'

'FYI: Constantina Milova died in shipyard AA3 crash on 4th May. RIP.'
'Knew her. Good citizen.'
'Friend of mine. Miss her.'
'god rest'
'There is no god! Space SOB who caused crash!!!'

'Got Mic8.96 circuit in ur pile? Got fuel inj. Corve X7 4 swap.'

Apparently this was the local corkboard. The messages were written in between the graffiti, which seemed oddly respectful of these small missives. They'd been chalked or spray-painted on quite neatly, apart from the one complaining about the lighting on sixth street. They spoke of a living, breathing community. One that had apparently little respect for property value, or didn't mind spray-painting on it, but a community nonetheless.

Higher than the average tagger could reach were massive messages which would be visible from the whole sector if the lighting wasn't so poor. They weren't the billboard advertisements one would find on other colonies. Wufei could only read a few of them without going further than his leash allowed, but they seemed to march along the whole wall. They were somewhat cryptic.

'Do what you want if you've earned it'

'Only My Freedom'

'Live now. Tomorrow we die.'

The last sounded very Slavic, which suited the name of the sector as well as the ethnicity of many of its inhabitants.

He walked away from the wall once he was roughly three blocks away from Duo's place and headed towards the center of the sector. He slowed as he approached 4th Street. There were people here, the first he'd seen so far on his walk. One of them was up a very long ladder which rested against the front of a building. The second man was anchoring the ladder and giving instructions and encouragements. These weren't helping much from the way the man up the ladder was swearing. They were changing the street lighting, Wufei realized. They must have had problems with these ones as well as 6th street's. All the lights on this side were off for the repairs.

"Fuck this!" The man at the top of the ladder was trying to undo something with a wrench, something very stuck. "Get loose, you fucking bastard! I want to go to bed!"

"Why? You have to be at the plant in three hours, why bother to-

" Fucking hell!" Presumably there were people sleeping in the building to which the light was attached, but that didn't stop the man from swearing at the top of his lungs. Considering the frequent racket of trains running overhead, it was likely that most of Freeport's citizens could sleep through the apocalypse.

"Okay, okay, calm down. Lenny can start your shift, okay? I'll tell him that you stayed up helping me do this, he can explain it to the super."

"Great, I get four hours of sleep instead of two!"
"Oy, I've been thanking you at every light on the street, but I guess I'll say it again: Thank you! Now stop bitching, man, I'm tired too and my head hurts." The man holding the ladder at the base had only one arm, which explained why he hadn't offered to take over for his exasperated friend yet. Wufei had seen a lot of amputees and wounded during the investigation yesterday. Not many people could afford prosthetics like Duo, and Freeport had apparently received more than its fair share of the war-ravaged.

"Mother...fucking...son..." the man at the top of the ladder growled, addressing the screw. Wufei had drifted nearer, because if the guy continued to move like that-

The man barked something that sounded Russian and very rude, hauled at the screw again, moved too far and unbalanced. Not much, but enough to send a shudder down the ladder. The one-armed man at the base gasped and clutched it, but it still wobbled and screeched as it slid a few inches.

Wufei's hands gripped it and helped steady it. The man at the top was silent, undoubtedly scared speechless by the sudden sense of how precariously he was situated. Wufei heard the ping of the wrench as it fell three stories to clatter across the rough metal of the walkway.

There was a moment of stillness and silence.

"Mirael? You okay up there?"

"Can I come down?" The man's voice at the top of the ladder sounded weak.

"Yeah, come down. Forget the fucking thing. We'll ask the Red Band to request a crane or something," the one-armed man said, glancing up, then he went back to looking Wufei over with sharp curiosity.

Wufei braced the ladder and Mirael came down. Once on the ground he grasped the ladder like a lifeline and let out a trembling sigh. He was in his mid-thirties, dressed in the faded and oily grey overalls of a factory worker.

"Huh? Who's this?" Mirael stared at Wufei, first the collar then the sword, and then he glanced around in surprise. Looking for Wufei's Handler, Wufei realized.

"Dunno. Oh, wait..." The one-armed man had been staring at him with the same intensity, but now he blinked. He wasn't much older than Wufei. His arm was missing just under the shoulder joint, and from the way he'd moved as he'd made way for Mirael, he'd suffered some spine or pelvic injury as well. But at rest, his back was soldier-straight in a faint echo of standing at attention. "Wait, Gilla over on Second Street told me that young grease-monkey in his building, Maxwell, brought a new Blade in. He said the guy was Colony Asian," he ended with a speculative look at Wufei.

A very awkward silence fell between the three men as Mirael and his friend realized they couldn't ask Wufei for confirmation, and Wufei bitterly remembered Duo's no-communication directive. He wasn't even allowed to nod to indicate they were right.

"That must be it," Mirael concluded with a last look around, in case Wufei's Handler showed up to contradict them. "Well, thanks, er...Gilla didn't mention his name, did he, Kolia?" Mirael looked a bit embarrassed as he turned towards his friend.

"Started with a vowel I think, O or U-something...sorry. Um, yeah, thanks for helping with the ladder. Mirael n' me have been changing the lighting on the street. It was starting to fritz out here, too. But it's been ages since they changed them last, and some of the screws are stuck."

Who the hell were these people? It was apparent that Mirael was only helping, he had 'factory
worker' written all over him. And if this was Kolia's job, to do basic maintenance, then he wasn't very well equipped for it. For that matter, who did civil works in Freeport? The corporation which exploited these workers? A company paid by local taxes? Neither of these men looked anything like a professional repairman sent by the Electricity Board. And they were poorly equipped; they should have a lifter and a security harness for this kind of work. But Kolia had a cart full of long-lasting streetlight neon replacements, and those were not cheap. They had to come from somewhere.

Mirael glared at the light three stories up, then at another one fixed onto the front of the next building. "Stupid cunt screw," he muttered. "Only two lights left. I hate to leave a job unfinished."

"I hate to call a crane over for just two lights," Kolia added with a resigned sigh. "But..."

Mirael and Kolia looked at the light above their heads, then speculatively at Wufei. Their eyes lingered over his wiry frame. They glanced at each other and then at Wufei again with an expression that could only be described as artfully hopeful.

Wufei sighed - inwardly - and went to pick up the fallen wrench. He dropped his jacket on the ground and slid his scabbard's recently affixed strap over his jumper. No offence to Mirael and Kolia, but nothing was going to make him leave his father's sword attended by two strangers. He grabbed a rung of the ladder and started climbing. Hopefully this was something a Blade was allowed to do without his Handler's permission.

"Thanks, man!" Three eager hands grasped the ladder behind him as he climbed, wrench stuck in his back pocket. "You need to undo two screws at the top, then bring down the whole box. There's a clip-on strap in the toolbag up there. Clip it on to the box and bring it down, Kolia will change the circuits and the bulb."

"That's assuming you can get it undone. Er, don't kill yourself. If it won't come loose, forget about it, we can."

Wufei had reached the light fixture already, moving quickly, poised and balanced, keeping his feet in the middle of each rung to stop the ladder from even shivering under his weight. A cloth toolbag was tied to the last rung of the ladder, along with a clip-on directional flashlight throwing its narrow beam on the screw that Mirael had been working on. The neon was similar to colony lighting boxes everywhere. He pulled out the wrench, set it to the screw, checked his balance, concentrated a second and twisted.

"Bloody hell!" That was Mirael. The snicker was from Kolia.

The second screw was easier. Wufei carefully put them in his pocket, then lifted the box up and sideways to loosen it from its frame.

"Bloody-" Mirael lapsed into muttered Russian and Kolia laughed.

Wufei clipped the rough canvas strap to the light box and made his way down again. Kolia motioned him to put it on the metal floor. He changed the neon bulb quickly and skillfully considering he had only one hand and he was steadying the piece between his knees. He proceeded to check the circuits and clean them out. Wufei had crouched down on the other side of the box in case Kolia needed an extra hand. Seeing that the other man was doing fine, he undid the plating on his side and started cleaning out and checking the fuse box and circuits around it. Wufei had worked on similar lights before. They'd used the same on A206 in the mobile suit bay.

"Huh, you know your way around," Kolia commented. "Thanks, man."
When they were done, Wufei carried the box back up the ladder and reattached it. Then the three of them moved the ladder to the last light. Mirael didn't comment this time as Wufei easily undid the screws and brought the box down; he was busy yawning.

"And there..." Kolia murmured, doing his work again with Wufei's help. "It's nice to have another handyman around. Hmm...Mirael, maybe we could go over to Maxwell's place and see if we can, er, get this guy's help for when we work on the vent mechanism near Center street in two days' time. Right now I only have you, me and Maria booked up for that, nobody else could move the start of their shift. We could really use another mechanic or two if we want to finish before the whistle blows." Kolia glanced at his friend hopefully.

"Kol, don't get the guy into trouble," Mirael murmured tiredly. He was propping himself against the ladder as if it were the only thing keeping him upright. "Maxwell might feel obligated, but I'm sure they both have other stuff to do."


"Maxwell's a Scissorman too, and a freetrader."

"Oh, I hadn't heard that. Okay." Kolia looked disappointed as he screwed the box shut. "Ah, never mind, we'll make do. Thanks, man!" The last was tossed at Wufei as he carried the light back up the ladder.

Once that was done, Mirael and Kolia thanked Wufei solemnly, giving him their full name and address, though he wasn't sure why. There was a stilted silence as they realized he couldn't answer in kind. Then they grinned and waved, and Mirael muttered about bed.

Wufei watched them as they walked away, talking quietly, pulling the cart with the remaining bulbs, the tools and the ladder. He wished he'd been able to ask them some questions. More small puzzles added to the bigger one that was Freeport. He shook his head and made his way back to the house.

According to what he'd overhead from Kolia, people would be going to work in a bit over an hour. Already windows were opening, and further down the street an old man settled behind a cart bearing trays of plastic-wrapped sandwiches. Better get back.

In the building's hallway, the first door to the right opened as he neared it. A pair of glasses beneath tight grey curls popped out, barely visible in the hall's dim lighting.

"Ah! It's you. I was hoping to catch you. Please, do come in."

She threw the door wide and waved him in. Wufei hesitated, but there was really no polite way of refusing the invitation if he couldn't speak. She motioned again and he entered hesitantly, with a glance at Duo's door at the end of the hall.

She closed the door behind her, then looked him up and down with a warm smile as he stood, uncertain, in the center of the cluttered room.

"My name is Tina Archinov. But everybody here calls me Babka." Her smile became luminous. "And your name is Wufei. I hope you don't mind my using your first name. Gilla didn't remember your last."

Wufei caught himself in the middle of a nod and looked at her a bit helplessly.

Babka's smile twitched and a faint blush touched her sallow cheeks. "I'm glad I got this chance to introduce myself properly. I completely forgot to tell you my name yesterday morning. I guess I was caught a bit off guard. Not many men bursting through the door to take a look at me naked these
Wufei winced and flushed. She laughed merrily, sounding much younger than her seventy-some years, and he blushed to his hairline.

"Oh, don't look like that, it wasn't your fault. You're new. It doesn't matter much anyway. Sit, sit! I was about to have breakfast, and it would be a pleasure if you can join me. I made some tea. Good stuff, not like that tar Duo drinks and mocks with the name of 'coffee'."

She had a faint Slavic accent, very faint. Otherwise her tone was even more cultured than Gilla's. Wufei sat in an old chair, the ersatz wood creaking under his weight, and watched her curiously. She bustled around, boiling water in an old samovar, its beaten copper sides glinting under the neon from her kitchen.

"Here," she said, handing him some tea and a slice of crumbling pastry. It had been placed on an old ceramic plate that looked like it had been decorated by a grandchild. "Tirza over in Barbieri made me some really good cake and I won't eat it all by myself. Eat!"

Wufei looked down at the cake and the tea on the table before him, and hoped Duo wasn't getting worried. Though it wasn't as if he could refuse with any remote semblance of etiquette if he couldn't speak. At least she wasn't expecting conversation. He'd never mastered the art of small talk.

"I hope you'll be staying," she said abruptly after a sip of her own cup. "Heero was a nice young man, but he never stayed."

The unexpected mention of his friend's name surprised Wufei. He covered it by taking a bite of pastry. It was very sweet and oily on the tongue. If it had any other flavor, it was covered by Freeport's usual aroma and the smell of boiled beets that seemed to occupy the room. Babka was beaming at him though, so he smiled in fake appreciation and honest thanks.

"Good, right? Tirza can do wonders in that kitchen of hers. You should taste her empanadas!"

Wufei took another bite in the hope that it might actually taste like something this time. No luck.

"Duo's alone a lot. That's not good for a young man his age. He doesn't work in the shipyards very often, especially since the accident. Mainly he stays here and fixes things. He fixed my radio!" She beamed at an old-fashioned CB to one side of the room, incongruous on a tiny table and doily. Wufei looked at it blankly. "Then he goes off on that ship of his, still all by himself. I hope he doesn't take any risks." Babka sighed and sipped her tea.

Wufei glanced at his surroundings while pushing the cake around the plate with the small fork. The room was as big as Duo's, though squarer. It was much homier, filled with old furniture, pieces of which had been carefully repaired. A few cheap knickknacks decorated small shelves. The kitchen had an oven and stove, not as big as Hyun's but more than sufficient for one person. Maybe she cooked for the neighbors too. She had a small bed off to one side, almost the size of a child's bed.

"I live alone. My husband's dead."

Wufei turned back to her, uncomfortable that his scrutiny had been noticed and his conclusions guessed. She was looking at him placidly, not at all upset.

"He's been dead for, let me see...twenty six years now. My, how time passes us by..." Babka nodded slowly. Then she brightened and nodded at a side-table lined with photographs in richly crafted silver frames. "Those are our children. We had six of them. Good thing I was a school-teacher! My brood filled my small class over the years. We lived on a small resource satellite for eighteen years after our
marriage, and there were never more than eight children at a time in our school. Milla and Jay are in L3 on two nice colonies. They work in engineering, and Milla is a Professor of Mechanical Science. I've got two grandchildren too."

Her voice was rich with pride. She didn't mention any of the others. Wufei examined the pictures in their heavy silver frames. Children, two older men smiling, three young men and one woman, two of them in Colony Defense uniforms. There were small candles in front of most of the pictures. He didn't comment, not that he was allowed to anyway.

Babka's eyes were proud, old and rich with decades of experiences, good and bad. She looked like a revered elder in her small, tatty home full of repaired furniture, a queen in a faded green jumper and black pants. Wufei glanced at the pictures again. One of the smiling young men, a handsome teen with Slavic features and black hair, was wearing a Sweeper uniform. Presumably that explained Babka's presence in Freeport. But there was a small candle in front of that picture, too. Wufei wondered why Jay and Milla left their old mother in this place if her connection here was dead. She didn't belong here at all.

He finished off his tea, wondering how he could excuse himself. The propriety due to his elders was giving him hell. He stared at the door, but she didn't take the hint, merely beamed at him.

"Did you want some more cake? Oh, sorry! You're not allowed to speak. I do tend to forget. Oh dear. I had the same problem with Heero. Though he wasn't very- oh, he was a nice young man, but he was probably a little shy-" She interrupted herself with an embarrassed cough and nodded at the counter where the cake was. "Do go and help yourself if you want some more. Have some tea as well."

One more cup of tea wouldn't hurt, his propriety argued; she might be insulted otherwise, and he couldn't thank her for her hospitality as it was. He poured the tea from the samovar, not attempting to tip it from a height with the elegant motion she'd used.

As he turned, a picture caught his eye. There were a lot of landscapes on the walls, amateur work, and a few children's drawings, but this was different: a long scroll in a frame, white paper glinting creamily under the light from an old lamp nearby. Elegantly painted Cyrillic words flowed across the paper, black against white.

"Ah, you're admiring my Tolstoy. Have you read him, child?"

Tolstoy? Wufei's studies - his life's pursuit before the war - had centered on Sino-Asian literature and philosophy, but he'd still read widely from other cultures. He'd read 'War and Peace' when he was eleven years old. Was this a quote?

"It's my favorite excerpt of his writings. I made it myself."

Wufei obligingly went to examine it more closely. The Cyrillic was beautifully drawn. A short poem? He didn't read or speak Russian.

Babka must have guessed, since she added, "In standard English, it says, 'Without Authority, there could be no worse violence than that of Authority under existing conditions'."

Wufei's cup rattled against the saucer. He felt very thankful for the collar around his throat; he'd be damned if he'd have known what to say otherwise.

"Of course, his ideas were very pure. Not a problem in itself, but not always adequate in the face of reality. Lucy Parsons now, she was someone who knew what she was talking about. She was born
into slavery, did you know that? She said-

"Ah, you're back! I was getting worried!" Duo exclaimed without looking up from the stabilizer, now purring like a contented cat.

The clink of ceramic against the workbench drew his attention to the small plate Wufei placed by his elbow. "Ah. Babka," he said softly, smiling affectionately as he examined the slice of pastry. "You'll have to help me with that, I can't stomach that much. Fei? You okay?"

Wufei tore his gaze away from the door leading to that other apartment and that charming old lady with her scroll on the wall. "Maxwell, your elderly neighbor is a radical anarchist."

Duo gave him a sunny smile. "Of course she is. Haven't you figured it out yet? We all are."
Once a number of men set out to sea. In an idle and mischievous moment, one of the passengers started to bore a hole in the bottom of the boat where he was sitting.
"What are you trying to do?" ...cried his fellow passengers in alarm.
"What does it concern you what I am doing?" ...replied the man... "I am not boring a hole under where you are sitting, only under my own place."
"It may be only under your place" ...retorted the others... "But should the water fill the boat, it will capsize... Then all of us will drown."
---Parable from the Talmud (I do not answer for the translation, I found many different ones online)

"Anarchy."

"Yup. Some coffee with that would be nice," Duo added dryly, nodding at Babka's cake. "It'd help drown the taste."

"I'll get it," Wufei answered numbly.

"Thanks."
The leftover coffee in the pot trickled into Duo's chipped mug, but Wufei's thoughts refused to similarly settle.

"Why didn't I know this?" he asked, putting the cup next to the cake on the worktop.

Duo was busy with a soldering iron, closing up the stabilizer unit's access panel. "You didn't have time to prepare for the mission -"

"Why don't we all know this?! I knew a bit about Freeport, everybody does. I've heard about the criminality, the smugglers, the pirates, the shipyards, the blockade, and I read an official Preventer report on the shuttle to L2 detailing them. But it failed to mention that even the little old ladies here have enough social dynamite to cause a serious disruption!"

"It don't?"

"No! I can't believe it. Somebody like Babka could foment a revolution somewhere if-"

"Oh no. Babka is a strict pacifist."

"I doubt you're all strict pacifists," said Wufei, thinking of some of Freeport's 'citizens' he'd met yesterday.

"Well, then, Agent Chang, you tell me why it ain't known all over ESUN." Duo looked completely indifferent as he put down the solder torch. "It's your world outside."

Wufei was silent again. He wasn't sure he liked the answer that occurred to him. The Peacecraft government was very concerned about image. The Bright New Hope for All Humanity, or whatever the last election slogan had been. It would be a bit jarring if over a hundred thousand people had turned their back on that pretty ideal and preferred, of all things, anarchy. Wouldn't look good on the
peace banners during the New Year march, now, would it? 'Peacecraft OK, Anarchy Better!'

"Aw hell, listen to that..." Duo had leaned back to stretch in the chair, and his joints were cracking like castanets. "Here, if you're going to stand around looking dazed, why don't you rub my shoulders? I've been sitting for hours."

Wufei muttered something. His hands found themselves settling on a hard, muscled back without the brain's conscious input.

"When you say anarchy...you mean a system, don't you. Not just- just general disorganization. You're talking about anarchism." It wasn't a question. As his hands started kneading, and Duo gave a startled but delighted grunt, thoughts were adding up in Wufei's mind. The absence of currency. The notorious lack of rules in Freeport. The writings on the wall, both the big mottos and the small words.

"I guess. Sorta. Hmmm." Duo's muscles started to melt under Wufei's fingers, like Sally's did when she badgered him into doing this for her. "If that means everyone free and out for themselves, then that's what we got."

"I helped two men change the lighting on 4th Street," Wufei countered. There was a whole argument behind that, but he was still too distracted by the entire realignment of his view of Freeport to put it into words.

"Did you?" Duo sounded surprised and honestly pleased.

"They were just ordinary people, so why were they changing the lighting?"

"Lights all over the sector are fritzing out. Makes noise. Tend to black out just when...hmmm...people walk by." Duo was beginning to sound almost sedated.

Wufei watched his fingers absently start on the knots in Duo's neck beneath the root of the braid. "But why were they changing them? There has to be some organisation that put them in charge?"

"No one's in charge. They changed 'em because they didn't want to listen to the noise of lights fritzing out near their home."

"But what if they hadn't?"

"Someone else woulda. Wow, sweet baby Jesus, you're good at that...never woulda guessed..." Duo bent his neck left and right slowly against the pressure of Wufei's fingers.

"But-" Wufei was starting to think constructively again. Which got him to wondering why the hell he was rubbing Maxwell's shoulders. He snatched his hands away, ignoring the little disappointed mewl behind him as he stalked away to the other chair. He sat as straight-backed as a judge and swiveled to face his informant, hands braced on his knees.

"Maxwell, anarchy doesn't work. You can't have a political system like that. Especially on a colony."

Duo didn't seem particularly intimidated by Wufei's pose or abrupt challenge. He was stretching to get the last kinks out. "I think it's because we're on a colony that it works at all. It's really simple. There's a fundamental drive that runs the whole thing."

"What?"

"Survival."
Duo's smile was cruel. He idly leaned over, switched off the stabilizer's temporary power supply and pulled the plug.

"It's not a political system that got chosen as such. A few thousand jailbirds started it, trying their best to survive but without cops and jailers this time. A few of them were anarchists - not the fuzzy dreamer kind. The bomber kind, which was why they were in the slammer in the first place. But beyond giving the others a basic idea of what they could do, I don't think many people listened to them, probably because they were nuts.

"Then a few years after that, some pirates and smugglers needed a place to hide from the heat, and they helped out. And then others arrived, looking for a haven, a last resort. I don't think I ever heard of anyone coming here looking for freedom, or any political thingy ending in -ism. They just don't have a choice anymore. If they stay outside, they'll either end up dead, conformed or broken, and they decide that Freeport is their only chance of survival, even if it ain't the most pleasant one. And things evolved from there. We're still evolving. The colony's changing all the time, with every new migrant who makes it through quarantine with his own idea of what he wants to do to get through the next day alive."

Wufei was shaking his head. "No, wait. You have a corporation, right? The Freeport Corporation, that deals with the ship-building industry. They're the ones controlling everything."

"That's just a piece of paper. Freeport acts as a group. Professional negotiators deal with the shipyards, they hire outside lawyers who work for kickbacks from the contracts. The rest of the money is sent to accounts in and around the Space Sphere and used to buy essential supplies for the colony. Machines, parts, food, medical gear, stuff like that."

"But people work in the shipyards. And you're repairing that mecha for them too. Who pays for that? Why do people do that?!"

"Because if we don't work in the yards, or repair the mechas, or fix the colony, then things would fall apart and we'd all die. Survival, I told you. It's not hard to choose between working on the one hand and chewing vacuum on the other. We organize stuff amongst ourselves, make sure shifts are covered, choose supervisors to direct the effort, ensure there's people to fill in the ship contracts and all that. I hope I ain't making it sound easy, 'cause it ain't," Duo added lazily, twiddling a screwdriver around the fingers of his left hand. "Your average citizen is an ornery critter at best. Organizing stuff can be hard. Those who got too much attitude are asked to work on something where they don't have to cooperate with others. There's always plenty to do. But in the end, we all work together. Got no choice. If we fuck up, this place is screwed."

"That can't possibly work-" Wufei stopped and rubbed his forehead. Concentrate. The next question came straight from Agent Chang, Preventer. "A society can't work without rules. What's to stop somebody from committing theft and murder?"

"Everybody else," Duo answered dryly.

"...What?"

"We ain't got any pretty ideals in Freeport. If we had, we'd have sold them for scrap long ago. Anarchy is selfish. People watch out first for themselves. Sure, we don't have laws to stop people from murdering their neighbor, but if you see somebody do that, who's to say you won't be next? So people watch each other as much as they watch out for each other. Most of us got nothing worth being murdered for anyway, and a few good strong friends around to bury us and then ask some seriously bloody questions if it does go ahead and happen."
"That's anarchy," Wufei bit out, then scowled. "I mean that's chaos. That's just plain bloody chaos."

"Yeah, yeah, I knew that'd get you going," Duo snickered. "Damn, I wish I had my camera ready. I left the bloody thing on Scythe."

Wufei gestured over his shoulder at the door. "What's to stop someone from bursting in here right now and-"

"I have good locks on the door," Duo put in. "Mind you, that's because of the tools I have here. They aren't mine, they belong to Freeport. They gave them to me because I'm a great mechanic and I can fix suit parts, but they'd be hard to replace, so I don't want them stolen."

"Good for you," Wufei said with heavy irony, "but how about Babka? She doesn't have good locks. I could open her door with one kick. And she has windows out on the street."

"Babka has nothing worth stealing."

"That's not the point!" Wufei glared at the floor, trying to remember what the point was. The picture of Babka smiling proudly kept nudging his thoughts. Her room, cluttered with furniture nobody would want, and nearly no luxuries - "How about those silver picture frames?"

A chair crashed against the workbench. Wufei tensed, but Duo was already there, in his face. Two hands slammed into the armrests, pinning Wufei in.

Duo smiled like he used to when he was called Shinigami. "If someone stole the pictures of Babka's dead children, me and Gilla and Ivanov and Maria and all the others would hunt them down and flay them very slowly. That's why they'll never be stolen."

Wufei's reflexes were screaming, his hands were a breath away from Duo's chest, raised in automatic retaliation against a possible attack. Duo said nothing, still looming over him. Wufei let his arms drop by increments.

"That works for Babka." His voice was a bit hoarse. "What about the other old ladies-"

"They all have friends too. Your standing with others is your only currency in Freeport. We're a selfish lot, but we keep in mind that today they need you, tomorrow you'll need them."

"That's barbaric." Wufei shook his head, and reined in the reflex to inch back. Duo was real close still, his eyes incandescent in the light from the workbench. "You're saying it just all--... spins out of control and everybody just cares about how it affects them? There's no- no laws? Who protects the helpless, the ones at the bottom of the heap?"

"Who protects them outside?" Duo answered, straightening up and turning back to his chair. There was something cold and hard behind the smirk. "The cops, who don't dare go into the worst slums? The Preventers, who are so strapped for personnel they only act in the war-damaged countries to put down fires? The guys at the bottom of the heap, like you say, are the ones coming to Freeport. And here they stay for the most part. Some go back to the ghettos. To Neo-Tokyo's cathouses, overfilled prisons, soup kitchens and dole queues choked up by hundreds of thousands of out-of-work soldiers. It's their choice. I don't give a damn."

"That's just..." Wufei was appalled, and not just as a representative of law and order. This went against so much he'd been taught and believed in. "I can't believe this obscenity works."

"Define 'works'. Do we have a level of violence to rival the worst colonies? Sure. Is it dark, cold and stinky? Well, yeah. Do we get drifters and psychopaths and malcontents and rebels? Hell, we
embrace 'em. Are we all one accident away from total disaster and a hullbreach? You betcha! Do we have kids with rickets, thieving meals, peddling drugs and living little better than rats like they still do in every slum today, even in the richest countries? No."

"No? Why, who feeds them?" Wufei challenged. "Who cares?"

"Freeport ain't got no laws, but we do have traditions, ways we do things." Duo carefully put aside the stabilizer and fished a mechanical servo-arm attachment from beneath the workbench. "There's the quarantine. We'll let anyone in, but they have to realize the kind of work it entails. It's fair warning. Then there's the basics. Everybody gets free food, free clothing, free air, free housing, free care and free education."

"Sounds like socialism."

"That's the only bit that does, then. But it's not for the pretty principles. It's selfish too." Duo threw him a wolf-like grin as he wiped old oil from a nut-head with a rag. "If we didn't feed and clothe everybody, robbery and murders would go through the fucking ceiling. Then there's the import checks."

"What are those?"

"Did you notice that I didn't bring any of the cargo on Scythe in with me?"

"Yes."

"Freeport gets first dibs on anything imported. If I dock here, then my cargo kinda belongs to the colony first and foremost, and they give me what I need out of it. It's...kinda complicated. You wouldn't get it."

"I do, and that sounds like communism," Wufei shot back tartly.

"You really like those -isms, don't you. Well, it ain't communism, 'cause what belongs to me fucking well does belong to me. Like Scythe. Like my camera, which I really wish I had right now, and my laptop and stuff like that. But people don't like hoarders; that's the kind of thing that can start a riot, so we keep an eye out on what comes in. And one thing's a given: we don't allow hard drugs and guns into Freeport. It's not a law, it's common sense. We got too many delicate mechanisms that would be fucking hard to replace if some hopped-up loony with an Uzi started firing all over the place. That means everything coming in to Freeport has to be checked."

"By whom?"

Duo shrugged. "By people. Karl, who passed us through customs, isn't an employee. He's just a guy. We're buddies, I know him. He works on the shipyards every third week, and he serves as a hauler on the Sweeper Corvette Calisto when he wants to go to L4 to see his daughter and ex. And when he has the time, he works at customs."

"If he's not an employee, what stops him from accepting bribes, or stealing the cargo?"

"What does being an employee have to do with it?" Duo snorted. "How do you think your wanted terrorists move around the colonies if they're not bribing the shuttle-port employees? As for skimming...would you put that sword of yours through Baggage on an Earth to L2 run? You can't be that sweet and naive about how things work out there."

Wufei's glare could have cut steel plating. Duo grinned right in its teeth and picked up a number six wrench.
"Karl might help himself to something he fancied, but only if he thought the freighter wouldn't really miss it, unless he wants a couple of tough sailors checking out his liver with their knuckles. And the reason Karl works in Customs, and would never accept a bribe to let in hard drugs or guns, is simple survival again. If Karl and others like him didn't do the job, then Customs would either get backed up and the colony'd run short of important stuff, or people would get in without checks and Karl might end up being the one shot by the hopped-up Uzi-waving junky."

"They find people to do all the work? They're all volunteers?"

"There's always ten times more odd jobs than volunteers." Duo smiled sourly as he examined the ports on the servo-arm's plating. "But yeah, that's the basis of it. People in Freeport have three or four jobs apiece. Me, for example. I'm mainly a mechanic. This-" he tapped the arm gently with the tool in his hand, "is my main job. But I'm also a Scissorman and a freetrader. That's how I keep Scythe running. And...I have a few other jobs squirreled away."

He reached for the laptop. Wufei had the impression Duo had been about to say something else, but had thought better of it.

"But how about-"

"Look, man, as much as I love that stunned herring look on your face right now, I really gotta work on this. Half the circuits are fried. I got the spare parts, but I have to wire them up to the boards. It's gonna take awhile." Duo had clicked up a few schematics on his laptop and sent them to the small, cheap printer in the corner.

"But..." Wufei shook himself, realizing that had come out dangerously close to plaintive.

He didn't believe Duo, though the smuggler was notorious for never lying. Even yesterday, when he was risking both their lives trying to worm information out of drug-runners and smuggler rings, Duo had told the truth. Very inventively, true, but he'd never told a downright lie. But Wufei just couldn't believe what he'd been told. It just didn't make sense.

"We'll pick it up again later, if you want. Much later. We're gonna be busy for awhile, between my mechanics job, the Scissorman stuff and Carver, and this whole subject's off-limits while we're anywhere in the streets outside. But hey!" Duo gave him the cheerful, baiting grin Wufei was getting familiar with. "You're here as the big-shot investigator, and you tell me you're a scholar to boot. I gave you the info you need, you figure it out."

Yes, why not? Wufei would be stuck in Freeport for a few weeks at the very least. He'd have time to make his own observations. Duo was surely...not lying, but the braided joker was surely doing something to confuse Wufei, because none of this made any sense. A colony could not function like that. Wufei would keep his eyes open and figure out how things really worked here, as an unbiased observer. And in addition, Wufei decided as he stood up, he was not going to let Duo catch him out that badly again. Stunned herring indeed...

He kicked a leg of Duo's swivel chair and felt mildly satisfied at the wide-eyed look he got in return. "Sit in the other chair, Maxwell. You start wiring up the circuit boards, I'll open it up and strip out the burnt circuits."

Duo's surprise lasted only a fraction of a second, then he grinned. "Sounds good."

Wufei sat down in the vacated seat, Duo's warmth still clinging to it, warming his back. His intellect was being challenged, even momentarily overwhelmed; by surprise, and by all the questions and details he'd picked up these past few days, now jostling for attention and classification into this
insane theory when he knew very well that he did not have enough data yet to make an informed analysis. The wrench in his hand felt reassuringly solid by contrast. Some manual labor would constitute a good break.

But there was one point on which he would not allow confusion.

"Duo?"

"Hm?" Duo didn't glance up from where he was sorting through microchips in a box. He'd speared the print-out of circuit schematics through a nail in the wall in front of him and was glancing at it frequently.

"I have to ask one more question." Just one, but this one was important; it was for the mission.

"Promise? Okay, what is it?"

"Why are you helping me find Carver?"

Duo picked up a microchip and stared blindly at its part number. "Selfish reason," he muttered, sounding a little defensive beneath the veneer of one who couldn't care less. "I just don't want him dating my sister."

Wufei nodded and attacked the first bolt.

The arm took even longer to fix than the stabilizer, and at one point Wufei had to root through the pile of broken computer equipment in the yard, looking for something that could serve as an Xcom90 controller chip. They ate the borscht before going to bed. It wasn't as bad as Duo had made out, but neither was it very good. Wufei didn't dig into the Freeport matter any further. He needed more of his own observations before being able to weigh what Duo had told him. Besides Duo was giving him these little oblique looks as if he was expecting Wufei to crack and start peppering him with questions, and Wufei would be damned first. The matter of how Freeport kept from spontaneously imploding wasn't really crucial to the mission as long as Duo served him as a guide as promised, so Wufei had the time to figure it out for himself.

He curled up in his sleeping bag and stared at the hilt of his sword, gleaming in a stray dash of streetlight from the ever-shuttered windows. He listened to bedspring noises and a yawn; Duo settling down for the night.

The howl and clatter of a train overhead made him stiffen and nearly sit up. His alarm had been renewed almost to its original levels now that he'd been told there was no real organization as such between him and the dance of ships and satellites outside. As the echoes died, he closed his eyes and tried to organize his thoughts.

Anarchism...a pipe-dream. Either a raving monster called chaos that devoured and drove mad anyone in its path, or a kindly community of dreamers who thought that human beings really were nice deep down, and who lived in benevolence and equality until the real world caught up with them and crushed them. Both those extremes used the same name, and anarchy had covered a thousand different nuances in between. But none of them had ever made it work. Well, as far as Wufei knew. He'd studied political systems and philosophies during his schooling, but he'd mainly concentrated on
Asian history and post-colonial politics. Wufei fell asleep speculating on ways he could obtain some
answers without getting teased, and without spending too much time and effort on it when the
mission was his first priority. Maybe he could borrow the laptop and do some research next time Duo
had to work on some mecha parts...

When Wufei woke up the next day, Duo was at the workbench carefully packing the stabilizer in a
crate. He was wearing a tight black shirt and his spring-loaded sheath strapped over his forearm.
Good, it looked like Wufei could forget politics today. They were going to work on something far
more important. Finding that dog Carver.

"'Fraid it's gonna be the pizza this morning, mate. Unless you want to eat enough N-bars to hold you
for more than six hours. We're going to Zap. That's almost half-way around the station, and we have
to walk a good part of the way."

"Can't we eat over there?" Wufei was getting tired of energy bars, though they'd still be his first
choice compared to pizza.

"Ah, no. In Zap, I'd be lucky to get a drink of water." There was something slightly ominous about
the tight, deadly smile with which Duo said that, but he refused to elaborate; he merely served up
coffee strong enough to put a hole in Wufei's gut, and pizza gooey and chewy enough to fix that
same hole afterwards.

The prickles of Wufei's instincts heightened at Duo's silence over 'breakfast', and intensified when he
catching the smuggler checking his spring-loaded sheath for the second time. But when it was time to
go, Duo did not put on his Scissorman's leather coat, slipping into a non-descript Sweeper jacket
instead.

"Let's just say there are people in Zap who don't like me much," Duo finally admitted, when Wufei
pressed.

"Then why don't you call this person?" Wufei asked, eyes on their surroundings as they stepped out
the door. The streets of Makhno were empty. He and Duo were still out of synch with the sector's
day/night cycle.

"I need to show him something."

"Vid him a pic, or send him an email. Or does Freeport use carrier pigeons."

"Nah, the cats would eat them. We don't have vidcomms, only plain and simple phone lines. They're
already enough work to maintain. As for email...it so happens that Freeport has some of the greatest
hackers alive living here, and, surprise, surprise, they don't have much respect for privacy and stuff
like that. My network's Yuy-ed now, no one's cracking that baby, but I can't say the same for the guy
I'm going to see. And what I need to show him, we can't afford to have spread across the colony's
net. That's why we're going in person. A lot of stuff is done in person in Freeport. People like to see
who they're dealing with, and it ain't that big a colony."

"But some places are dangerous," Wufei surmised as they turned a corner and headed towards the
airlock.

"Yup. That's why we're taking the long route instead of the train. The guys in Zap work on the
shipyards as needed, in the mecha and ship maintenance and pilot sections for the most, so they're in
and out at all hours. There's no real shift for them. We could bump into some on the train any time of
the day, and if they see me, and word gets to certain parties...well, it could get a bit messy," Duo
concluded with a razor-sharp grin.
A bit messy. This from the guy who once thought attacking heavily armed convoys of mobile dolls by himself was sound tactics and 'a lotta fun'. Wufei made sure once more that his sword, strapped on his back, was quickly accessible and could slide cleanly from the scabbard.

They took what Duo referred to as the back road: walking instead of taking the shuttle, cutting across streets to go through alleys, detouring around certain areas for no apparent reason, and taking the smaller airlocks and service tunnels. They avoided any sector where the shifts had sent people into the streets, which made the journey rather convoluted. Wufei glanced at his watch when he saw the name Emilio Zapata on a small maintenance airlock. They'd been walking for over two and a half hours with the cautious silence of soldiers in potentially hostile territory.

After all these precautions, Wufei expected Zapata to be some kind of ghetto, but it looked like a mirror image of Makhno and the other sectors he'd seen so far, only better maintained, with good lighting on the streets and well-painted walls and buildings. Instead of junkyards, there were open areas with long benches and tables at regular intervals. Though Duo skirted wide around these, Wufei caught sight of what appeared to be a pot luck going on at one of them. He saw no playgrounds, but they passed a basket ball and tennis court under a harsh set of floodlights.

Duo avoided people, keeping to the alleys and courtyards. He had his braid stuffed down the back of his jacket, his bangs hanging over his eyes and an innocent, slightly vacuous look on his face. Wufei felt like he stood out a mile with his collar and sword. He tried to move like Duo, shape his body-language into something less threatening, but it wasn't in his nature. A few people stared at them from the windows as they passed. Duo walked on quickly.

After a quick look around, Duo slipped down a dark alley between two buildings. A baby was crying behind an open window, the first sign of any children so far; most of Zap's inhabitants seemed to be young people in their mid to late twenties.

Halfway down the alley, Duo turned sharply and walked down a few steps to a basement door. He glanced around before knocking. After a minute of nothing happening, he knocked again.

A distant squeak of bedsprings was followed by a grumble as someone approached the door. "-asleep only two fucking hours, who the fuck-"

"Cesar," Duo hissed near the keyhole.

The grumble abruptly cut off. There was a clack and fumble at the lock and door handle and then a man in his thirties wrenched the door open.

"Fuck, get your ass in here!" He grabbed Duo by the arm and dragged him into the room. Wufei had his sword half out at the man's first move, but Duo didn't look alarmed as he stumbled over the doorstep.

"Hi, Cesar. How's things?" Duo patted down his rumpled Sweeper jacket and smiled as if the abrupt and vigorous invitation to come in were perfectly normal. Wufei slipped his sword back into its scabbard and followed. The man closed the door behind him after a quick glance at the empty alley outside.

Cesar was a big man, nearly six feet tall, arms and legs corded with muscle just starting to run to fat. He had the beginnings of a belly on him, curving what had probably once been a wide set of six-packs, covered by a ratty old t-shirt with sweat stains like haloes trapped under his arms. A pair of long shorts and socks against the cold was all that he was wearing besides that. He was badly in need of a shave, but his hair was cut in a buzz crew that was at odds with his tired, shadowed face.
"Sorry I woke you, man," said Duo, nodding towards an unmade bed barely visible in the second of two small rooms. "I didn't realize you were on split shift."

"S'okay. What's up? Who's this?" Wufei was once again the beneficiary of the Freeport Scrutiny.

"Friend of mine."

"I can see that," Cesar commented with a slight smirk as he noted the collar. Then his eyes narrowed as he examined Wufei's stance, his eyes. "Same deal as last guy?"

"Yeah." Duo had hesitated a bit before nodding.

"You live dangerously, Maxwell. I don't care if you got a couple of Elders on your side, you're still in for the tar and feathers if the locals find out you work with Preventers."

Wufei glanced quickly at Duo, but the latter did nothing more than shrug. "It won't be the first time. If everybody liked me, life would be boring."

"That's why you're in Zapata? You like the excitement?" Cesar's laugh was more of a wheeze.

"Yeah, I live for it," Duo replied drolly. "Look, Cesar, I'm after someone. Here. Seen this guy?"

Only a long habit of control kept Wufei's expression neutral when Duo fished Carver's specs from his pocket, unfolded them and passed them to the other man. The folder with Carver's info had been left in the safe on Scythe, he had no idea when Duo had managed to filch these details.

Cesar took the pictures to the light over a small desk and looked at them carefully. His back was straight, he held himself easily even as he leaned over to get a better look at the photos. There was an army knife in a sheath strapped to his thigh, barely hidden by the shorts.

"He's not from Zap. I'm sure of that."

"Damn. Or maybe, 'good'. Would have been tough tracking him through here. You never seen him, not even going through?"

"No, pretty sure I haven't. Name? Details?"

"Don't know his name. Occupation: hitman. A citizen."

"Sure?"

"Kills with a machete. Know many pros who do that outside?"

"Yeah, some prefer blades, I hear. But I'll give you that one, they're rare. Most of them use sniper rifles and guns. Associates?"

"None known."

"Fuck, Maxwell, what do you expect me to do if you don't-"

"I'm not asking you to find the bruise. I just wanted to make sure he's not ex-military."

"He could still be, but not from around here." Cesar gave the picture one last careful look and handed it back. "Try the other sectors."

"Will do. Can you keep an eye out for him in case he comes through here?"
"Anybody he's likely to be talking to?"

"Not really. Maybe Finn's bunch. He might try to hitch a ride with pirates to get out. But my guess is, he'll use the same route as when he came in. I think Ravachol's freetraders took him through the blockade."

"Ravachol, that guy from L2? If your man's got that kind of connections, why would he come around here then?"

"He's big, he's mean, he could be ex-military, and he works with terrorists and guerrillas."

"In Europe? Asia?"

"Well, no, in space mostly."

"Then you're in the wrong sector, Duo."

"You're probably right. But I had to make sure. You're my only antenna in Zap, Cesar."

"I feel so blessed," Cesar wheezed. "I'd offer you guys something to drink, but I was right in the middle of my night, and besides, I don't particularly want you hanging around here. I've got enough problems. Plus, no offence to the silent guy over there, but I don't like Preventers. So..."

"We'll haul rockets outta here, then. Thanks, I owe you one. Did you have anything you wanted me lookin' into?"

"Nope. Things have been pretty quiet here, and I've been busy. Been teaching a few rookies how to spacewalk. It's heaps of fun when they start puking in their suits."

"You still have that drill-sergeant humor, you sadistic motherfucker."

Cesar wheezed.

Duo turned on his heels and headed towards the door with a casual wave over his shoulder. "I'll see you around. Maybe at Fieder's one day."

"Make sure I'm drinking alone before you say hi, then," Cesar answered with a bleak smile. "Watch your back on your way out. Be safe, kid."

"You too, man."

Wufei followed Duo out without a word. They dodged down the alley and walked swiftly towards the sector's wall and the small airlock they'd used on their way in.

"He knew about me," Wufei said when they stopped in the shadows of a building to let a small group of friends walk by, talking amongst themselves.

"Yeah. Cesar is...he's someone who helps me around here. A contact."

"Ex-OZ." It wasn't a question. Wufei had met - and killed - too many of Cesar's peers to be mistaken in this. Probably a non-com officer, either suits or heavy infantry.

"A lotta people in Zap are, that or Alliance" Duo informed him with a shrug, eyes on the men passing by.

That explained a lot. It didn't explain the genuine concern in Cesar's eyes when he'd told Duo to be
careful. Wufei wondered how the two men had met and formed a bond of such trust that Duo would let Cesar know who Wufei was, and Heero before him.

Duo's pace accelerated and his head came up as they neared the lock. There were five people sitting on a porch step half a block away, Wufei noted with concern. They'd not been there before. The men weren't looking their way, and in Freeport that was a bit odd in itself. Wufei judged the distance. If they had to, he and Duo could run for it. They were faster than anybody around here, and Duo had shown he knew the ins and outs of all the sectors they'd traversed to get here. If they could get out of the service tunnel beyond the lock, they could easily lose any pursuers in the alleys and sheds in the next sector over. Wufei kept a close eye on the men as Duo hit the lock's release.

A hiss warned him. Duo took a quick step back and Wufei did the same, hand on his sword hilt. There was someone already in the airlock. Several someones.

The sparse lighting of the service tunnel glinted off a long knife. Wufei heard the men behind them stand up from the porch, and more coming down the street, blocking them in.
"Que ce soit l'Armée rouge,
Les flics de Pretoria,
Malgré le sang qui coule...

Makhnovtchina, Makhnovtchina,
Armée noire de nos partisans.
Qui combattez en Ukraine
Contre les rouges et les blancs!

( Be it the Red Army
or the Pretoria cops
Despite the blood flowing...

Makhnovtchina, Makhnovtchina,
Black Army of our partisans
Who fought in Ukraine
Against the Reds and the Whites!)
---Bérurier Noir, 'Makhnovtchina'

"Maxwell. Fancy seeing you here again."

Wufei dropped back another step, giving Duo room to dodge. Six men were coming up the street to his right. Five were walking over from the porch, blocking the other way. There were three men in the service tunnel, stepping through the airlock. Some of the attackers were openly armed - two long metal pipes, a sawed-off pool cue, a small crossbow - but the others walked like they were carrying something lethal too.

"Erickson." Duo sounded loud and bored, his tone as placating as a well-chosen finger in the face. "I'd say it's a pleasure, but it ain't. You gonna be stupid again?"

"We made it clear what would happen if you returned to Zapata."

This Erickson was built like a Terran, six inches taller than Duo, with a bigger, heavier frame under a loose bomber jacket. Blonde hair fell lankly over strong, regular features. He had his hands behind his back where he was swishing something. Officer, Wufei concluded immediately. Definitely OZ. Must have been pretty young during the war, he was barely in his mid-twenties. One of those young wolves who worshiped Treize, then; the ones who thought they were the new leaders of the human race. What the hell was he doing in Freeport?

The man was looking at Duo fixedly. He was trying for cold and professional, but Wufei had learned to read people these past five years. Erickson was looking at Duo like a junky looks at his next dose, with a mixture of need and loathing.

Wufei turned to face the men behind them, putting his back to Duo's. Shinigami could take care of Erickson and his men in the service tunnel without breaking a sweat, but the two of them could easily be overwhelmed by sheer numbers. This was the worst of tactical positions. Erickson had set this trap up remarkably well and with officer-school precision considering he'd only had about forty
minutes tops to prepare it.

"Don't be a rabble-rouser, Erickson," Duo drawled. "I was just leaving. I wasn't here more than-"

"You're not going anywhere," Erickson cut in softly. Wufei wondered why Duo was even trying to talk his way out of this one. Erickson was going to try to kill them, that much was very clear.

"Oy, who says you're the one to dictate right-o'-way!" Duo's voice rang out, the baritone bouncing against the metal of the street, the rigid front of the buildings behind him and the sector wall before him. Wufei weighed up their attackers, wondering if some of them might be cowed. There were only a couple of real fanatics of Erickson's caliber in the lot, staring at Duo with murder in their eyes, but the rest looked perfectly eager and willing for a fight.

"Give me one valid reason to stop me-"

"Shut up." Erickson took a step forward, interrupting Duo's loud tirade, but it was too late. A window opened in the building behind them, and another, and Wufei realized what Duo had been trying to do. Two women rounded an alley coming out of a courtyard. A grizzled elderly man opened a door nearby and hobbled out on a crutch, an artificial leg clanging against the metal walkway.

"I didn't do anything wrong! Whatever hangup you got with me from outside is your own fucking problem!" Duo had taken a step back, putting his back to Wufei's, staying out of weapon's range of Erickson. Wufei wanted to move away and give Duo room, but the men around him were too close, he'd be flanked. The presence of potential witnesses had had surprisingly little impact on their aggressors' attitude.

Wufei took a second look at the faces of his supposed 'witnesses' and re-evaluated the situation. The half-dozen people who'd showed up gave no signs they were planning to interfere. On the whole, they were watching this the same way the people in Che sector had watched that duel the other day...which was really not a promising parallel. Wufei felt the cold of battle-calm coming over him, muting even his disgust and anger. The odds of getting out of this without a fight were small and getting smaller.

"What's going on?" There was a whisper in the growing crowd as more people wandered over from the houses and streets to see what the gathering was about. Still nobody looked ready to intervene. Maybe seeing two people getting beaten up was good entertainment if you didn't have a TV. If anybody showed up with a popcorn and hotdog stand, Wufei was going to go ballistic, Preventer ethics be damned.

"Dunno. Erickson's boys?" The words passed through the crowd, a dozen strong now. Two of Erickson's men had faded back into the throng of bystanders, visibly more comfortable as spectators than perpetrators. That still left twelve men. Most had bludgeoning weapons, four had drawn long knives, one had the crossbow; a crude one-shot piece, but it didn't need to be sophisticated at this distance. Wufei had his back turned to Erickson and his two cronies, he couldn't see what they were carrying.

"Who'd they corner? A grabber?"

People were staring, milling around, talking in near-whispers. Duo wasn't shouting any more. He was staring Erickson down, but his head was tilted ever so slightly as he listened to the growing throng. Apparently the spectators were more of a deciding factor than Wufei had initially guessed.

"Dunno. Seen those two before?"
"No."

"Not from around here. Not from Haymarket either."

"Looks like Erickson's guys caught themselves a shit-stirrer."

"A rat-catcher?" someone asked sharply. Wufei felt a glimmer of hope; there had been concern and disapproval in that voice, and it felt directed at Erickson’s premeditated violence. What was a rat-catcher?

"No, s’ that terrorist Maxwell."

That had been one of Erickson's men in the crowd. Wonderful. Somebody muttered 'Gundam', and the temperature, always cool in Freeport, plummeted to sub-arctic.

The pressure of Duo's back against his was suddenly gone. Duo had taken half a step away, giving them room to dodge and maneuver. Wufei slowly unhooked the bottom catch of his sword's strap, angling his body to hide the movement between himself and Duo. He kept his fingers on the leather of the strap though, leaving the scabbard hanging casually from his shoulder. If Duo could still worm their way out of this situation without bloodshed...

"Erickson." A woman walked through the crowd, a one-year-old child carried on her hip. She was dressed in worker's overall and a thick blue jumper crocheted with crude daisies, but she carried herself with natural authority. Members of the crowd stiffened, distant echoes of standing at attention. The rest of Freeport might be under the rule of anarchy, but Wufei gathered that Zapata had kept a rough hierarchy reflecting the one-time military order of many of its citizens.

"Maxwell has friends, and they will hear about this. That is all I have to say." The woman's eyes were cold and hard. She had a scar at the edge of her chin, spearing up towards her ear; her hair was crisply braided back, scornfully refusing to even try to hide it. She was in her mid thirties, Wufei estimated. He wondered how she had ended up in Freeport. She seemed considerably more out of place than even Babka.

"Do we know each other?" Duo asked behind Wufei's back.

The woman gave him a scornful look. "Reba Hamilton-Grey," she rapped out, and Wufei could feel a 'Major' or a 'Colonel' standing crisply at attention behind the name.

"A pleasure to meet you. Nice sector you have here, ma'am," said Duo in a heavy parody of politeness. "Open, friendly and fair."

Her eyes narrowed and her mouth tightened, but she ignored the taunt and the slur on her sector. She turned, hitching the child further into her arms. "You shouldn't have shown up here, Pilot," was all she said over her shoulder.

"My, my, this does bring back memories. Buncha soldier-boys ganging up on two small colonists," Duo chuckled. "You gonna actually attack us this time? Or you gonna make us surrender by threatening to blow up the colony?"

Hamilton-Grey spun around, eyes blazing. "Don't you dare-

"Erickson, I know it goes against the grain to leave your flight squadron behind," Duo drawled, completely ignoring her, "but how about we leave our friends outta this and do this the Freeport way. You gonna be a man, and take me on like one, or-"
The sword, still in its scabbard, flew over Wufei's shoulder as he jerked down hard on the strap. He caught it and accelerated the movement as he took two steps forward, slamming it into the shoulder of the man holding the crossbow. The crossbow wobbled, its bearer gasped and staggered. The scabbard swiped sideways and caught him in the jaw hard, snapping his head around. The man crumpled, the crossbow hit the deck. Wufei brought his booted heel down on it sharply. Crunch. No more projectile weapon.

The shooter's neighbor had just started to turn, eyes wide. Wufei slammed the point of his scabbard into the man's gut, then grabbed his victim's chin as he folded over the pain and shoved him backwards into the person behind him. They went down in a jumble of limbs. Wufei had already moved on. Less than five seconds had elapsed.

He took down the next person in line with a street-brawl blow his childhood teachers would have disapproved of. The man dropped the dagger he'd barely raised, fell over and started to vomit.

Someone shouted behind him. Wufei glanced over his shoulder. Duo was smiling, five-foot-six of pure menace even with his hands in his pockets. He seemed oblivious to Wufei's attack; he didn't break eye-contact with Erickson and his two sidekicks who were staring back at him, frozen in indecision between two threats. But beyond Duo, an ex-soldier on the other side of the circle of mostly stunned attackers had finally reacted. He was running towards Wufei, a cosh raised -

Duo didn't look away from Erickson, but his vicious backhand connected with the attacker's throat, clotheslining him neatly.

Wufei didn't see what happened next, but Duo could manage. Wufei was going for Erickson and his sidekicks before they snapped out of their trance and attacked Duo three-to-one. He batted a long dagger aside with his scabbard and didn't break stride; the next step threw his entire body weight against the knife-wielder, pounding him into the nearby wall.

Erickson finally started to turn, away from Duo and towards the attack, unsheathing a short saber. Wufei spun away from the winded man and backhanded Erickson in the same movement. Missed, only caught the edge of his chin. Erickson stumbled back. In that second of leeway, Wufei whipped his sword sharply at the second sidekick near the service tunnel, who was trying to get around Erickson. The sword stayed in Wufei's hand while the scabbard flew off, catching the man in the face; he fell back, startled, and tripped over the lip of the service hatch.

Erickson was back, saber swinging at Wufei. Naked blades met, hissed edge to edge - an orthodox fencer, Wufei judged instantly. His quick and dirty retaliation followed that realization in the next split second. He twisted his blade up to shoulder height, and when Erickson broke his stance to step back like the good fencer he was, Wufei let his blade swipe forward neatly, around the belled guard, to smash Erickson's thumb against the saber's hilt. He used the flat of the blade. Duo had not told him he could shed blood, which would include slicing Erickson's thumb off.

Erickson grunted, fingers loosening in shock. Wufei leaped at him, wrenched the saber from the injured hand by the blade near the guard, spun around and smashed the saber's hilt into his opponent's face.

Erickson stumbled back- Wufei dodged a blow from someone on his right by falling into a half-crouch. A metal pipe whistled over his head. He threw himself sideways and his shoulder slammed into the attacker's midriff, sending him staggering back, winded, in Duo's direction. Wufei straightened and dropped the saber. He didn't need to look around, a muffled thud behind him meant one less attacker. He grabbed the tottering Erickson by the back of the bomber jacket with his free hand, spun him around and brought his sword up sharply against the latter's throat.
It had been hardly more than a minute since Wufei's sword had slammed into the crossbow-bearer's shoulder. Many in the street around them were still frozen in shock. Erickson's men, those still standing, stared wildly around, looking for friends who were no longer there. They'd been infantry, MS pilots and such; they could attack quickly as a coordinated group with suits or rifles, but they weren't used to street-brawls with two expert killers.

"As I was saying, you can take me on one-on-one like a man, or we can let my rather twitchy Blade take care of all your friends and then we'll see where we're at," Duo finally concluded a bit dryly. He had his hands in his pockets again and not a hair out of place, as if he had nothing to do with the two bodies at his feet. His voice was a steely purr, the attitude of one utterly in control of the situation. There was just the tiniest acid look tossed Wufei's way before Duo turned to Hamilton-Grey, the only indication that Duo had been caught offguard as much as their attackers, though he'd rallied ten times faster.

The look bounced right off of Wufei's own certitude that he'd done the only thing possible in the circumstances. Yes, maybe he should have waited for Duo's signal, but that would have been foolish. The moment had been exactly right: everybody was concentrating on Hamilton-Grey and Duo, forgetting Wufei; Erickson had made clear his intentions to not let them get away; and Duo hadn't yet managed to go through with his stupid suggestion of single combat with a man taller than he was with all fingers intact. Wufei made a mental note to himself to chew Duo out for that moronic and dangerous idea later. It was Wufei's job to take the stupid risks, not Duo's. But that would be later. Right now, with the crowd slowly recovering and those of Erickson's men who could still move climbing to their feet and glaring at him, the situation was still entirely too open and volatile to start thinking about victory.

He took a quick tally. Two of the men he'd attacked would not get up again before the fight was well and truly over. Three others were injured. They would still be a danger, but they would be slower, easier to deal with. One man at Duo's feet was not moving. Wufei didn't know what Duo had done to him, but it looked like it would last awhile. The first of Duo's victims had gotten to his knees, rubbing his throat and groaning hoarsely, his cosh lost. The others looked cowed. All eyes were on Wufei's blade at Erickson's throat.

Duo's attitude was relaxed, his hands appeared to be still in his pockets, but Wufei could see that his fists were balled so that they gave that impression without hindering his movements. His slim stiletto was in his left hand, hidden in a fold of the Sweeper jacket. He'd positioned himself on Wufei's left, guarding the flank where Erickson didn't shield him. Which of course wasn't ideal. Duo was the one they needed to protect. Wufei's life wouldn't be worth gutter-dirt if Duo were killed. Hopefully the gang wouldn't jump them with Erickson's life on the line.

Erickson made a strangled sound. Wufei didn't trust the ex-officer to be reasonable, so he had his sword across the man's Adam's apple and pressed right into the skin. He could feel a thin trickle of blood run warm and gummy against his fingers on the hilt. Erickson would probably order his men to attack and take his chances in the struggle, that was how badly he wanted Duo's hide, but Wufei didn't think he'd cut his own throat to do so. The crowd was the unknown quantity-

A loud crack split the air.

Wufei had thrown himself and his hostage back towards the wall before he'd even consciously recognized the sound. Gunshot!

Duo was on the ground. For a heart-stopping moment Wufei thought his friend had been hit. But Duo's knife-hand was out, fingers straight and empty. There'd been the impact sound of a bullet on the wall near the service tunnel, Wufei registered after the fact. Echoes still rumbled between the
A strangled grunt drew his attention to the left. A figure fell forwards, scattering Erickson's men on either side. Erickson made a choked noise and Wufei automatically twisted the blade, biting deeper. His hostage stilled.

Duo stood up slowly, unhurt. Wufei let his blade ease against Erickson's throat before he accidentally slit it.

Someone was hyperventilating in the crowd. People stepped back, leaving the fallen figure alone in a widening circle. Wufei shifted Erickson around to get a better look. Erickson made no opposition to the movement, stumbling in Wufei's grip as if stunned.

A man lay crumpled on the deck in a growing pool. It'd been one of the aggressors from the side of the circle that Wufei had not attacked. Duo's knife protruded from his throat, coated in pouring blood. A bubbling wheeze, fading fast, was the only sound other than the person gasping in the crowd and a child crying. Then a dog yipped excitedly in the distance and someone shouted, alarmed, only a few streets away.

The man's spasming fingers twitched over a small gun until Duo kicked it away.

The whistling breath staggered, ended in a rattle. Hamilton-Grey's voice covered the man's death-throes. She took a step forward, hand on her child's head, turning its gaze away from the sight of the dead body.

"Everybody disperse. You there, pull yourself together and go get a Red Band. Tell him to contact Brian Nassau or Seeli M'nara over at Lao Tzu and then come here. You two, stay with me. Everybody else, leave. Now."

Hamilton-Grey stopped briefly by the gun before facing Duo. Her eyes were beyond angry. She stared at him as if she would love to have him lined up against a wall and shot. Duo stared back, challenging. She tore her eyes away to glare at Wufei.

"Let him go," she ordered.

Yes, colonel, Sir! Wufei thought sarcastically and tightened his grip on Erickson. Most of Erickson's men had vanished with the well-disciplined crowd, carrying the unconscious with them, but four of them hung back at the mouth of the nearby alley, looking anxiously at their leader.

Hamilton-Grey glared, then with a hiss turned the look on Duo, who was completely unimpressed. His eyes were shining with adrenaline, his mouth twisted into a smile that was both pleasant and lethal. He took his time, staring at her, waiting for that slight flinch in her eyes, before glancing over his shoulder.

"Let him go."

Wufei reluctantly obeyed, but only because his role required it. What he really wanted to do was discuss with Erickson the cowardice of a dozen thugs attacking two men, and what Treize would have thought of such despicable behavior. And then he would have liked to arrest the creep if at all possible. But this was Freeport, his mission was Carver, and he had to be Duo's Blade; he'd given Duo his word. He stared back at Erickson as the man shot him a venomous glare and wiped the blood from his throat.

Maybe Erickson guessed that the black eyes tracing his features were adding him to a long list in a longer memory. The glare faltered and he looked away with a grimace.
"Did you know?"

Erickson turned quickly towards Hamilton-Grey who'd addressed him. He glanced at the gun. "No."
His voice was hoarse, his hand still at his throat.

Hamilton-Grey scrutinized him, the blatant, challenging Freeport stare, looking for any signs of hesitation or lies. In her arms, the child whimpered and struggled to turn its head. She soothed it with a few murmured words, then she looked at Duo.

"Go. Leave. Now."

Instead of leaving, Duo took a step forward and kicked the body over. Hamilton-Grey made a noise in her throat, but she didn't protest further. Duo leaned forwards and wrenched his dagger loose. The corpse twitched. Wufei could smell the stink of shit and blood covering Freeport’s usual tang of metal and sewage, the scent of death distilled. Duo wiped his dagger on the man's jacket, stood up and walked past Erickson without a glance, heading towards the service lock. Wufei followed him in silence.

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Duo walked on as if nobody could touch them, but Wufei remembered the way Erickson had looked at them, the way Hamilton-Grey had too for that matter, and kept glancing over his shoulder.

He assumed they were opting for a safer route when Duo suddenly turned at a right angle to the road and headed down an alley. They stopped at a manhole cover bisected by the sector wall. Duo's face was strangely neutral as he undid the catch and lifted it up. He swung down, feet hitting the rungs of a ladder, and disappeared into the darkness. Wufei cast a last look around. Nobody watching as far as he could see. He climbed down after his ally, dragging the cover shut after them.

Duo was a distant ringing of feet against rungs in the near darkness. Wufei followed a bit slower. He wasn't that used to ladders.

The ladder went down and down, broken by tiny fenced-in landings every fifteen meters. Everything was bolted onto the sector wall which continued down into this giant dark space. The only lighting were square neons illuminating the landings, though two out of three had burned out and not been replaced. Wufei felt his fingers stiffen with the growing cold.

A bare bulb at the bottom slowly grew nearer and nearer. Duo was nowhere to be seen. When his feet were once more on firm metal, Wufei looked around. Huge cargo containers were piled high on either side, heavily locked. There was no trace of Duo in this maze. Just as he was thinking of shouting - a daunting notion in this stillness of hulking metal giants and darkness - he caught a flicker of movement and followed.

A service door to the outer hull area was swinging slowly shut when Wufei neared it. He poked his head cautiously through the opening. The corridor beyond was dark and very cold. It smelled of dust and crude engine oil. A narrow slice of grayish light, quite unlike the red and yellow neon of the colony, delineated the exit.

A star port...Wufei glanced from the starscape on the other side of the thick plexi to the barely visible figure perched carelessly on a big box, one foot dangling like a child, the other caught up protectively against his chest.
It was too late to back out and leave the other alone, so Wufei picked a box right by the exit to sit, leaving Duo his space.

Duo's face was calm as he watched the stars. Almost peaceful. Wufei scrutinized him from beneath the cover of his lashes and hair. There was no regret in his stance or expression, no sadness. Certainly no guilt. Just contemplation. Because for men like them, it was of very, very little consequence to take one life. It was in fact quite easy, and often simpler than the alternative. This was why Duo was taking this moment, not to regret, but to look in the silence for that space that existed between him and the monster he could become. Wufei understood this without question, nearly without thought. It was like an instinct, he felt it as if it were as visible as Duo's profile in the starlight. Which was strange, because Wufei himself was different that way. He kept no space between himself and his actions. In his meditation, he remembered and tallied and judged. Had he done the right thing, acted with honor, stayed true to his goals. If he had, then it mattered little what he was or what he might become. Yet for all it was different, he could still understand this moment, this silence which wasn't his, which was probably why Duo had let him follow him into darkness and starlight.

The silence between them didn't feel uncomfortable at that moment. Though Wufei had to acknowledge it as a grim fact that it took a dead body to connect them, that they truly understood each other like this only after blood had been shed. Wufei sank into a light meditation, reflecting on this, safe in the knowledge that nobody could approach them in this out-of-the-way space without footsteps ringing against the metal and echoing around the containers like an alarm. He watched the slow dance of tugs and shuttles around a cargo-freighter under construction, bathed in the harsh beams of spacelights, with the stars beyond them all, superposed yet unconnected.

Finally Duo leaned a shoulder back against the wall, turning slightly towards Wufei. His eyes were still on the stars beyond the small viewport, but his body language indicated that communication was now acceptable.

Tactics and worries and questions about Erickson and future safety measures buzzed at the back of Wufei's skull, but they stayed behind the moment of stillness and silence that had yet to be broken. Wufei dug some of Erickson's blood from beneath his fingernails, and the question that broke the silence had nothing to do with those prompted by duty.

"Why did you come here? To Freeport, I mean?" His question seemed to linger, tangled in his breath turning white, frozen in the icy air and the half-light.

Duo finally tore his eyes away from the stars to look at Wufei inquisitively.

"Survival?" Wufei prompted. "Didn't you say that's what moves people here? But you were hardly desperate or threatened, you surely had other options."

"I always had options. Steal or starve. Fight or die. When I was young, I..."

There was another silence, one that divided them this time. Wufei felt there was a lot left unsaid there, things that did not belong to the war-bond they shared, and that Duo would have no reason to confide in him. Wufei wondered briefly if Heero had ever heard the words that Duo did not say at this point.

"I had choices. I could sell what I had. To a pimp, or a gang. Well, the former, nah. And the latter...the mob, the juvies, the runners, the sharks...they were just like the Alliance, yanno? Just bullies. They made me sick. So I took option C - none of the above. I didn't know much more about Freeport than rumors, legends and tall tales, but hey, at least it sounded fun! So I stowed myself away on a Sweeper ship with the half-cocked notion that I could sneak into the colony and start
living the life of milk and honey, like. I was eleven, keep in mind. Fate happened to shove me onto G's ship and the rest is Recent History 101, Operation Meteor, the Revised Edition."

Wufei stared at the stars and tried to imagine...but that was pointless. He had his own childhood which would certainly startle and horrify quite a few people too, but it was completely different than the little glimpse he'd been allowed into Duo's. He couldn't even imagine being in that situation, having to make that choice at that age. Not that Duo had mentioned his youth with self-pity or remembered pain. No, it had just been to explain and excuse his rather simplistic idea of sneaking into Freeport. Duo sounded amused, full of affectionate approval for that young child's brashness.

"I meant, after the war," Wufei elaborated.

"Oh, yeah, like all the doors were gonna open because I was a war hero or something. Relena didn't want to make us into- into-"

"Figures of admiration. Role models," Wufei supplied.

"Right. That meant I was just one more soldier without a job."

"You could have had a job," Wufei said carefully.

Duo snorted. "Yeah, that's what Une said. Now just try for a sec to wrap your head around the concept that is 'Agent Duo Maxwell, Preventer'. Stop when you're getting a headache. When I turned her down, that just convinced Une of what she knew all along: I was just some piece of spacer junk floating around looking for trouble. And say, Fei? Why the hell do you look like you sat on a tack each time I say 'Spacer'? I noticed that before."

"It's not..." Wufei cleared his throat and tried to find the words that seemed clear enough and easy to follow when put down in the Codes of Conduct Regarding Minorities, and seemed so ludicrous here, in the cold darkness with the scent of blood and metal clinging to an icy starport.

"What, s'not politically correct to say 'Spacer' outside?" Duo quizzed, guessing the origin of Wufei's discomfort.

"No, as a matter of fact."

"What're you supposed to say, then?"

"Naturally born colonist," Wufei said with considerable reluctance.

The breathless second of silence that followed shattered as Duo practically fell over backwards, laughing like a loon. Wufei felt his lips tug upwards into a rueful half-smile. The twilight and quiet were definitely dispelled along with the contemplative mood as Duo started to wheeze and whimper and hold his sides, repeating 'naturally born colonists' as soon as he had enough breath and then laughing again. The laughter purged whatever darkness had been lurking in the small space with them.

"Oh...oh Jesus..." Duo wiped his eyes, still prone to fits of chuckles. "Oh, that's such bull. That's so typical. Fuck it, we're spacers! Warped genes! Rejects! Raised in slums, born from piss-poor, uneducated parents who didn't know what space radiation did to the fucking genome. Naturally born-" Duo dissolved into snorts of laughter again. His words had been cocky and brash, warped with that strange in-your-face pride that would probably startle and horrify the kindly, pitying HR person who'd written the memo about 'addressing naturally born colonists with the proper respect and dignity afforded to any human being, regardless of origin'.
"Nobody can help the circumstances of their birth," Wufei said, defensive of the rule because, even though it'd made him roll his eyes at the time, he'd grown used to it and it was now part of the system he protected. "It shouldn't be a hindrance to-"

"Yeah, well, it is," Duo retorted. "'Cause when you're born and brought up in a slum, guess what? Your schools look like war zones, if you even have any. Poverty's a family disease where I grew up, and all that 'we all have the same chances' shitlicking nonsense is bull. Fuck, I didn't know how to read and write until Fath- until some people sent me to a proper school when I was seven, and that was pretty damn lucky for me. L2's got a saying: once a spacer, always a spacer. Goes for your kids too. The Alliance used to treat us like rats, like sub-humans. I grant you, the new regime's better. But still, do you know any spacers in high office? Or on TV? Except for that punk over on Edgy Channel or whatever they call it; gimmick-boy there. I bet those long-lobed ears aren't even real. Know any spacers in Preventer upper echelon? No, they're all blue-bloods like you."

Wufei stiffened, his glare crossing swords with a mocking, knowledgeable glance.

"Well, aren't you?" Duo teased.

"My parent's gametes were screened for genetic damage and fertilized in vitro, of course." It had been the same for any self-respecting family ever since men had come to space. Until recently that is, when colony shielding against space radiation had been improved. Normally conceived children were just starting to be born in some of the better colonies. "But there's no other selection to the gametes, fertilization is left to chance. The eggs are-" Were. Past tense. They were all dead. Wufei continued without a flinch around the correction. "The eggs were re-implanted into the womb after conception and then nature was allowed to take its course. We did not believe in any genetic manipulation whatsoever."

"Really? Lucky draw, then," said Duo, eyes traveling approvingly over Wufei's body in a way that was downright provoking. Wufei countered with a cold stare that bounced right off its target. Duo went on regardless. "Well you're still a blue-blood in my books, by education if not by genetic mucking-around."

Wufei couldn't deny it, though the way Duo said it made it sound like a slight.

"At least you're not as bad as Quatre. He's got a pedigree a mile long, and the best genetic enhancements money could buy."

Wufei frowned. That would be a fairly logical conclusion, knowing that the Winner family, like many great colonist empires, relied heavily on in vitro techniques and genetic manipulation, producing offspring like one produced race horses. But Wufei had always wondered about that. He met with Quatre regularly. The last time he'd seen the businessman was four months ago at a charity relief with half of his sisters, and though Quatre had grown to be a really good-looking man, taller than Wufei, he was still two inches shorter than any of the Winner women Wufei had met. And the space-heart business...Wufei had never heard of a genetic enhancement that could produce that. That sort of mutation was more of a spacer thing- but it was not for him to speculate, particularly about a friend and a man he respected.

Duo obviously didn't have his restraint. "Heero now, he's got more than money could buy. It's obvious that poor guy got put together in some kinda lab with funds that could feed L2 for a year. Didn't even have an ID tattoo, can you believe that? Trowa had to have one made for him when Heero came here the first time. Yeah, when Zechsy-boy said that the people from the colonies were a new race, a better humanity, it was you guys he was talkin' about. I don't think blondie even knew I was on the radar. And I happen to know Une shares that opinion. She trusts me as far as she can throw me. In Deathscythe."
"What do you mean?" The one time Une had mentioned Duo within earshot of Wufei, it was to bemoan the fact that he'd turned her down and run to the wrong side of the law.

"It's old history." There was the ghost of a pout on Duo's face; he looked more annoyed than truly offended. "It was when I was bumming around right after the war. I was, yanno, doing stuff for Hilde, living my life, wondering if I wanted to hook up with the Sweepers or buy my own ship. I didn't want to move too far away from Hil and Heero. And the rest of you, of course."

Wufei looked at the stars. He hadn't known what Duo had been doing right after the war. He himself had...imploded. Too much confusion; too torn, too bloodied. Treize had done his final mindjob on him and...Wufei didn't like to remember those bitter, lost months. Peace was this all-pervasive, nauseatingly sweet concept everybody was busy embracing, and Wufei had felt like the war was still raging on right inside his soul. He didn't like to think about what he might have done, the mistakes he might have made...Trowa had spotted him during surveillance on a possible problem colony, and Heero had showed up two days later to knock some sense into him. Literally.

By the time Wufei had reflected on his life and beliefs, found his place in the scheme of things and joined the Preventers, Duo had already disappeared, gone into quarantine in Freeport.

"I might have stayed outside," Duo explained, eyes back on the star-port. "Or I could have become an out-of-towner; that's what we call a freetrader who lives outside and mostly shows up in Freeport to do business and meet friends. But Une and Tro did their number on me, trying to get me to join. They get on well together. Quite the double-act. Scuttlebut's got it they're even closer these days. Hey, is it true what I hear about those two?"

"No, though I might add that it is not my place to speculate either way."

"Really? *Cause it'd be the perfect couple. He's got no personality and she's got a few to spare."

Wufei was too surprised to be immediately angered on his friend's behalf. "I thought you and Trowa got along well?"

"We did. Oh, I guess we do. Kinda. We didn't hang out much during the war, mind you, but we got along okay afterwards, or so I thought. I guess I just thought he'd be on my side, and it turns out he was on Une's. I really wasn't surprised to hear he got promoted. Saw that one coming a mile away. Captain, now. Bet he's good at his job, too."

"I don't-"

"When I turned her ladyship down, she sicked her boy-toy on me." Duo's annoyance didn't feel genuine, or rather it felt overblown, covering something like hurt beneath it. "And did he say, 'no ma'am, Duo's my ol' pal, he wouldn't do nothing'? Nope, the bastard broke into my apartment and riffled through it like I was some potential agitator with my terrorist cell allegiance card stuck on the fridge with a magnet."

The bit about having Duo's place searched, Wufei wouldn't put past Une at all; she'd always been properly paranoid where Gundam pilots were concerned. They all had the training, the attitude and the inclination to do a lot of damage to the establishment if they saw fit. Wufei knew he'd come close to it, for one. It would make sense for her to send Trowa, too. Trowa had rapidly been promoted to the position of her aide, and made Captain three years ago, as soon as his fake ID said he was eighteen. On the surface he was her go-fer, her stand-in and the commander of a branch of the Specials. In practice, particularly back then, he was the person she sent to do a lot of her dirty work, the kind that couldn't make it into a report. Wufei wouldn't be surprised if Trowa had been the one to investigate Duo's place, but he wondered how Duo could be so certain, and take it so personally.
"How do you know Trowa checked your apartment?" Wufei asked rationally.

"Hey, you're talking to the master of stealth here!" Duo countered, visibly challenged. "However good someone is, there are always subtle signs that-

"Maybe, but Trowa is very good. Besides, how could you know it was him specifically?"

Duo's wolfish grin dissolved into a grimace. "Okay, if you got to know, he left everything text-book intact and in place, from the lint in the sofa to the dust-bunnies under the bed. He also left my well-hidden black-market Luger on the table with a post-it note stuck to the barrel saying, 'Duo, next time I come here, this is either gone or registered. I'm in the bar at the corner if you want a drink. Trowa'."

Subtle signs, huh? Wufei took one look at Duo's chagrined face and burst out laughing so hard he had to grab the edge of the box to catch his balance.

He tried to stifle it, covering his mouth with a fist after that first outburst. He didn't laugh out loud as a rule or lose his composure in front of others. Maybe that was why he couldn't stop now. The laughter faded to a chuckle, but refused to end; it popped up again every time he remembered Duo's indignant expression. He choked and coughed, and glanced up in incipient self-consciousness. Duo was looking at him with a small, almost hesitant smile. He looked enchanted.

"Wow. I don't think I've ever seen you laugh before...almost worth having Trowa make a fool outta me."

Wufei forced the laughter down, wiped his eyes. He sighed, shook his head. "You realize Trowa did that on purpose, right? To warn you?"

"Of course. But he couldn't have just dropped by and, like, told me? He had to rub my nose in it? I spent hours finding a good spot to hide that Luger!" Duo was making wide gestures and looked theatrically affronted. Wufei struggled to keep the laughter from bubbling up again.

"Anyway...that pissed me off a bit, but it wasn't anything I didn't expect," Duo continued, staring out at the stars again. "It just reminded me of what living outside implied. All the rules, for good and bad. And I made up my mind. I knew I belonged here. In a way I always have. Always been making my own rules. I went and had one last drink with Trowa at that bar, stopped by to see Hil, left Heero a note - he was on some mission somewhere - and hopped the nearest Sweeper ship to Freeport. And here I am."

---

Their footsteps rang hollowly, chasing each other around row upon endless row of cargo containers. They were on their way home and Wufei was starting to think like a Preventer again.

"That man, Erickson. He knew who you were. Does he know your address?"

His voice covered the echoes of footsteps, making him glance around uneasily.

"Erickson? That loser?" Duo's brash baritone careened into the eerie silence around the containers, knocking it over and then flipping it the bird. "Sure. A lot of people know where I live."

"Doesn't that worry you?" Wufei ground out. "What if he decides to drop by your place while we're
sleeping? You killed one of his men." Wufei was confident in his and Duo's ability to fight it out, but he was also aware that they'd been lucky to defeat that many opponents without any injuries. He didn't feel like trying his luck again, or getting into a fracas that could involve Babka, Gilla and the other neighbors.

"Erickson don't need an excuse to want to recyc me. He's a mad dog." Duo sniffed. "At the end of the war five years ago, when his commanding officer surrendered along with Une and the lot, Erickson shot him and tried to take command of his unit. You'd killed Treize about five minutes before, and the whole 'give peace a chance' thing didn't sit well with him. Sweet Jesus, I just realized! Thank god he didn't know who you were, he'd have gone bat-shit."

"He knows you were a pilot," Wufei pointed out, now having something else to worry about.

"It's that fucking vid they took of me when I was captured. I've changed a bit, but some OZ personnel still recognize me. And though I don't brag about what I did in the war, I won't hide it either. Others know, and talk."

"If you cut that bloody braid, Maxwell."

"You're assuming I care about 'em. Let them take their fucking shot."

"It's your funeral," Wufei muttered.

"Erickson's not a problem. It's not just me he's after, he hates everybody. For losing the war, for making him a fugitive, for putting him here, for the goddamn universe that refuses to recognize him as the superior human being that he is. He picks fights all the time, he's got a whole list of pet hates: ex-White Fang, ex-resistance, ex-Alliance, ex-Gundam Pilots...He's got a lotta guts and charisma, so he has a following, as you saw, but that won't help him forever. One of these days we'll find him in the gutter with his throat cut and no loss. But right now he's got bigger problems. One of his men was packing."

"Ah, yes. The thing you assured me couldn't happen here," said Wufei, remembering another subject to get angry about.

"It shouldn't!" Duo's flare of outrage easily matched and surpassed Wufei's. It echoed the horror of the crowd as they'd drawn back from the body and the gun. The reaction had been strangely over-the-top, even for a society where most people were not armed. Wufei had felt a moment of surprise that the man had even dared to pull it at all. He must have lost his head when he saw the blood on Erickson's throat.

"I told you, the firearm ban here is serious!" Duo continued.

"Why? They sure weren't going to hesitate to kill us with metal pipes. If anything, a bullet would be more merciful," Wufei countered.

"Actually, the crowd mighta stopped them before they actually ex-ed us. That wasn't a properly set-up duel, and I hadn't done anything wrong. But the gun..." Duo hesitated. Wufei caught a sideways glance in his direction. When Duo finished his sentence, his voice was loud and Wufei thought it sounded oddly defensive. "It's just too dangerous. Too random. Anybody can fire a gun and kill someone. In Freeport, we like our fights to be up close and personal, mano a mano. It's our way. Yeah, guns are a no-no. Even if Erickson didn't know anything about the piece, that's gonna stick. He lost face." Duo said that last with the same import as 'he lost a limb'.

"That'll just make him more dangerous. I ask you again, what are we going to do to stop him from..."
"He won't show up in Makh. He didn't before, he won't now. He'll only attack people who show up in Zap or in areas he considers as his stomping ground."

"Why? There aren't any laws here to stop him, right?" Wufei growled, sticking his hands in the pockets of his jacket and glowering at the containers around them. Bloody Freeport. This madhouse was just as responsible for that man's death as he, Duo and Erickson were in Wufei's opinion.

"No laws except the law of survival," Duo corrected him. "If Erickson showed up in Makh with his friends, he'd be meeting my friends. Or friends of my friends. Or just guys from White Fang who reckon that if they let him jump all over me, they'll be next. Erickson's got some serious issues, but he's not completely psycho or his men wouldn't follow him. He knows that if he makes too much noise, somebody will nail his hide to the sector wall."

"Do you have many friends?" Wufei asked pointedly. "You know the people in your building, but none of them could do much more than slow Erickson down. If he really decided to come after you, you'd be defenseless."

"Shinigami is never defenseless, Chang," Duo informed him, eyes gleaming in the sparse lighting. "Like that Grey chick said earlier, I got friends. They don't all live in Makh or in my building, but there are enough people who'd come looking for blood if I croaked in anything less than legit circumstances. Because of that, I'm safe from people who want a rep taking down a G-pilot, or just ex-ing me because they feel like it. Some people know who I am and respect me for what I did, as many as hate my guts for it. I had plenty of offers to live in other sectors when I'd finished quarantine. Alan Morgenstern practically had a room all ready for me over in Kropotkin. He's a respected guy in that sector. Said he'd be honored to have me, and wanted to make sure my past wouldn't catch up with me. There are a lot of ol' colony rebels in his sector, Sweepers from Peacemillion and a few White Fang, but Morgenstern and others run a tight ship and there's almost never any trouble. Quite a few people know me there and consider I was kind of on their side, since I was against OZ."

"Why didn't you go there then? It sounds safer for you."

Duo appeared caught short by the question. He paused near the elevator doors they'd reached.

"I guess I could have," he said in a way that told Wufei that forming an alliance he'd refused to consider during the war, just to insure his safety now, had never even been considered. "But Makh is a sector where people can do mechanics. The scrap yards are good for parts. More my style. 'N I liked the name."

"Makhno? What does the name have to do with it?"

Duo shrugged carelessly, his eyes fixed on the elevator indicator. "I read up on the guy in quarantine. He's just a guy. Not really important."

"And what did this 'just a guy' do?"

"Something stupid. It's old history. Pre-colony. Ukraine, if I remember right. The dude led a small anarchist militia full of people with big stupid glorious ideals. His Black Army fought the royalist whites one way, they fought the commie reds another. They stood in the fucking middle and fought everybody."

Sounds familiar, Wufei thought, watching Duo's profile in the light from the elevator whose doors
had just opened.
Chapter 10

"The canals and the bridges, the embankments and cuts,
They blasted and dug with their sweat and their guts
They never drank water, but whiskey by pints
And the shanty towns rang with their songs and their fights...

They died in their hundreds with no sign to mark where
Save the brass in the pocket of the entrepreneur.
By landslide and rockblast they got buried so deep
That in death if not life they'll have peace while they sleep."
---The Pogues, 'Navigator'

"Will you relax?" Duo sighed.

Wufei treated that suggestion with the contempt it deserved and continued to scrutinize every shadowy corner and dark hallway they passed. They were back in the docking ring section on their way to board Scythe. The sound of their footsteps scattered and multiplied, chasing them down the long empty corridor. Each dark intersection had a great potential for ambush.

Duo walked as if he owned the place and Erickson hadn't tried to kill them less than twelve hours ago. Wufei still had bloodstains on his jacket's cuff, but the incident was apparently Over as far as Duo was concerned. Wufei was told repeatedly that Erickson would no longer be a problem, but he was having a hard time forgetting the man's rabid eyes, not to mention the fact that at least one of his thugs had managed to get his hands on a gun.

The room with the Customs desk was empty and dark, with only an emergency light above the door and the airlock, but the sniffers were operational and opened for them after a three-minute wait. The docking ring was a pool of shadows through which Duo strolled as if he hadn't a care in the world. Wufei only relaxed when Scythe's airlock hissed shut behind them.

Duo didn't waste any time. He was more interested in repairing his malfunctioning O2-meter than jumping at shadows. He dismantled the dial from the control panel in less than a minute. Then he took it to the bunk to work on, sitting cross-legged on an old towel to catch any oil, grime and small loose pieces that might fall. He absently waved Wufei towards the comms board.

"Since we're here, go ahead and type up a progress report for your bosses. I'll encrypt it and send it out when you're done," Duo mumbled around the small screwdriver in his mouth. "Then we can unload some boxes from the cargo hold."

Wufei stared at the blinking cursor of the text editor on the comms board. What exactly was he supposed to put in his report? 'Dear Trowa. I've been in Freeport for eighty-five hours. Duo and I have done a little groundwork, but the investigation as such hasn't actually started yet. We killed somebody yesterday. How are you doing?'

Finally he typed the code for 'still alive, investigation on track' and went to unload the boxes while Duo finished with the dial. He concentrated on the dozen or so boxes near the cargo hold entrance at Duo's request; they wouldn't empty Scythe's cargo hold in a day, not just the two of them, but this
was a start. Wufei stacked the boxes on a cart near Scythe's ramp and rolled them over to customs. But since there was no Karl there to pass them through, the hole in the wall through which they'd shoved the cart and boxes last time was sealed shut.

"Just leave them on the cart. Sooner or later someone will show up and give them the inspection and the rubber stamp," Duo informed him, coming up behind Wufei with the last two boxes.

"What's in these?"

"Some stuff I got from Hilde. Junk that she doesn't want because it's so old only Freeport still has those kinda systems, and spare computer parts for the mainframe. I also got a good deal on discarded clothing from Clothco on L3. I got a contact there. He puts them aside for me, and sells them for a dozen cred a box. The boxes with my name on them is my stuff. There's hardware in here for my workshop, and a few creature comforts."

"And when will you get these things, if they have to be passed through customs?"

Duo made a wide and cheerful 'your guess is as good as mine' gesture. Then he started digging through one of the boxes labeled 'Maxwell'. He took out a small tin and a couple of books. "Here, hold these, willya?"

Wufei checked what Duo had plunked into his arms. A tin of bay leaves, a jar of paprika, collected essays by Emma Goldman and a book in Russian. Duo piled some bowls, vids and cheap garlic concentrate on top of what he'd already deposited in Wufei's arms. Wufei shifted them around, trying not to drop anything.

"What is all this?"

"Just a few things for Babka, Gilla and some of my buddies."

"Why am I carrying them?" Wufei grunted as Duo looped a bag full of something that clinked over one of his fingers.

"I forgot to bring a duffel," Duo explained, crouched by yet another box and stuffing computer circuits, micro-tools and a camera into the pockets of his long leather coat. "I think I have a bag in here somewhere that we can use...We'll bag the stuff while we're going through the sniffers, might as well use those boring three minutes."

Wufei stared down at the pile in his arms and then at Duo as he realized the latter was suggesting they walk out with these goods without passing them through customs. "Are we allowed to do this?!"

Duo looked up at him with unconcealed amusement. "What part of 'lawless anarchy' did you not get, Wu?"

"But-"

"It's not like the Freeport police are going to spot us. Hell, you're the nearest thing we got to that right now. Tell you what, though-" Duo added, straightening up in one fluid gesture and leaning over to pat Wufei on the cheek, fingers warm through the glove, "-if it makes you feel any better, you can always arrest yourself," Duo whispered in his ear like it was some sort of naughty suggestion.

Wufei stood frozen for a second, startled by the unexpected contact, the warmth of Duo's hand and breath that cut right through Freeport's usual chill - then he caught up with what Duo had actually said, and spotted the impish grin from the corner of his eye. The bowls and other sundries in his arms
rattled as Wufei fought down the urge to drop the whole lot and sock their owner. He leveled a glare that could scorch steel instead. Duo chuckled and wandered off towards the sniffers. Wufei hesitated, and then for lack of any other choice he followed in a bit of a huff, though he preferred to think of it as justified irritation.

Beneath the annoyance, Wufei was puzzled, even a little scandalized. Duo had been so adamant about customs when he'd mentioned it before. He'd called it one of the colony's founding principles. Wufei had been raised to respect the law; even Freeport's. To see Duo flout regulations like this, even over such small, negligible items, ruffled him more than he wanted to admit. Particularly the way Duo seemed to think it was perfectly alright to do so. Wufei was trying to fit this into a coherent picture of how Freeport functioned, since function it did, and had been doing so regardless of all sense and logic for decades.

Okay, Chang, Wufei told himself; think about this rationally. The sniffers would stop anything truly dangerous from coming onboard, and they were automated. But then why were there customs...? Couldn't all his boxes be automatically screened for dangerous items? Duo had mentioned hoarding. Said it could cause riots. Maybe that meant that small quantities were not regulated - hell, the whole place was run on volunteers, they probably couldn't afford to track the small stuff. But anything big, like the complete content of Scythe's hold, well, that had to be tallied and... what? Shared? Redistributed? How the hell did all this work?!

Freetraders like Duo 'paid' their way with things they bought on the outside. Wufei was holding currency in his arms in the form of spices and bowls and the books which Duo was putting into a plastic bag he'd scrounged from one of the boxes. Freeport only bought the bare necessities for its inhabitants. The Freetraders made life nicer by bringing in little luxuries and raw materials that the cart vendors could transform into goods. Then Duo and his ilk received the goods in exchange. But how could an equitable system be derived from this?

Wufei could just ask. There was absolutely no valid reason not to ask. Right.

The perfectly subjective and invalid reason he didn't feel like asking was the way Duo's eyes took that teasing slant whenever Wufei couldn't figure something out for himself, as well as the look of surprise and grudging respect he got when he did deduce something on his own, or ask a pertinent question about an aspect of life here that Duo had not thought he'd notice.

And beneath the trappings of that unworthy and totally useless competition of 'one-up' with Duo which Wufei just could not seem to refrain from, there was another motivation. Wufei had to admit he was intrigued, and challenged as a scholar and a student of people and societies for the first time in years. Though he disapproved of most of the aspects of this culture he'd seen so far, he just wanted to figure out how it worked.

His cover story was an unexpected windfall in that regard: as a Blade, and a newly arrived one at that, Wufei wasn't really supposed to know how this place functioned, and the no-communication rule made it hard for him to trip himself up. So he could take his time and make his own observations and deductions.

Wufei wasn't used to doing things just for the pleasure and knowledge it brought him, not since his marriage. But he told himself his research had an important and practical application as well. He looked forward to making a complete report to Trowa at the end of his mission. It was essential that the Preventers collect better information on Freeport than that issued by Duo, who was obviously too partisan to be objective. Proper understanding of this society would be a necessary first step to one day putting Freeport to right-

"Stoooop it," Duo muttered. The sniffers hummed and tasted the air, ignoring them both.
"Stop what?" Wufei looked up, trying to make out Duo's features from the gleam of the emergency light in the airlock.

"Thinking. I can feel you do it in the dark with my eyes closed. It's annoying."

The sniffers opened and Duo dodged any comeback by darting out of the confined space. He swung the plastic bag he'd filled with the spices, books and other sundries and walked away with a cheeky grin.

"What are we doing today?" Wufei grumbled as he followed. Hopefully Duo wouldn't drag them into another hostile sector full of one-time enemies.

"On our way back we'll stop and talk to a few people I know. Sweepers. I don't have to pussy-foot around them, these guys sort of know what I'm up to. There's no saying if they'll help me or not, but they won't tell anybody what I'm after either. Well, not once I give them a few presents." Duo patted the bag, which clinked again. "These guys sweep around that L3 colony Carver was on six months ago. They might have some info on him. Sweepers have a long memory. If he's used them or their friends to travel, he might have left tracks. Should take us a couple hours, assuming the guys we need aren't all on the outside doin' their own business. After that, we go back home. I got to reinstall and config the CPU of the mecha we fixed. Its whole core got wiped. Sorry man, I know you don't understand-"

"I do," Wufei grunted. Yes, he was annoyed at yet more delays in the investigation, but after that incident in Zapata, he finally understood at gut level why they could not move faster, why Duo had to pursue his usual routine as much as possible. This was a tight community; people watched each other with a mixture of neighborliness and paranoia that made Wufei's shoulder blades itch. Duo - and his Blade - had to be discreet.

Duo was looking at him out of the corner of his eyes. The remnants of the smug grin were still clinging to his lips, but the quirk of his eyebrows was puzzled.

"You'll probably be bored. I won't need your help," the smuggler added as if trying to judge just how far Wufei's unexpected streak of patience would go.

Wufei was about to wave off Duo's probe when he remembered a small detail. He glanced at his watch.

"Don't worry about me. In fact, it's good you have something to keep you busy today, Maxwell. I forgot to tell you I have to help fix the vent mechanism near Center Street with a couple of acquaintances in a little over four hour. We'll be at it until the sector's night cycle, I imagine." Hopefully Mirael and Kolia were going ahead as scheduled with the repairs they'd mentioned, and wouldn't mind his silent help.

Duo hid his astonishment well, but he was wide-eyed and silent for a full ten seconds before he gathered himself enough to marshal a question that didn't sound too flustered. Wufei swallowed his own smirk. Justice was sweet.
At almost the same instant, Duo's hand dropped beneath the table and landed on Wufei's thigh. This did nothing for the Preventer's equanimity. His fingers nearly shattered the bottle he was holding.

"Relax." Duo was very good at smiling widely and talking discreetly at the same time. "It's none of our business."

Wufei knew that. He hadn't been about to interfere in the fight. Really. He'd stiffened in reaction, true, but that was perfectly normal... He shifted, then discreetly tried to shove Duo's hand away. Duo removed it while reaching for his beer; a natural gesture, as if he hadn't noticed Wufei's efforts. But there was a little smile hovering around the neck of the bottle that looked too angelic to be true.

The wounded fighter shook his head like a maddened bull. Blood and mucus splattered the floor. Wufei wondered what the man was on. His fingers tightened on the bottle again. He took a deep breath of the thick, sour air and forced himself to relax from his center outwards. He had to stay focused. This was their first break in the case. He was not going to mess this up.

Five days after the fight in Zapata, with some more Scissorman work and a few discreet inquiries behind them, something had finally 'shaken loose', as Duo put it. An email message came through on Duo's beaten-up old laptop; a rendezvous to meet with one of Ravachol's middlemen to discuss some possible business. The man had given Duo a time and a place, a bar a few sectors away from Makhno.

Wufei had followed Duo with steely anticipation. Finally he felt they were moving forward with the case. They were going to talk with a man who almost certainly controlled the ship and crew who'd smuggled Carver out of L2- X953. He might even know Carver personally. They just had to get him to talk.

On another, less important note, Wufei had also been looking forward to seeing the flipside of Freeport. So far he'd ventured through dorm sectors and industrial zones, meeting somewhat upstanding citizens of a tight community. Granted, he and Duo had been attacked once, had killed in self-defense and witnessed two other completely unrelated 'duels', but this was still far from the sink of iniquity he'd pictured Freeport to be. But now that they were meeting a known criminal in a bar, Wufei was about to see Freeport's seedy underbelly.

It wasn't at all what he'd expected. Somehow Wufei wasn't all that surprised.

The 'bar' was a five-story tall building covering an impressive surface area. Space was at a premium in Freeport; Duo's one-room apartment was the norm for bachelors all over the colony, particularly in sectors like Makhno where a good amount of space was taken up by junkyards and mechanics' shops. The size of the bar was not the only unusual detail, its location was unexpected as well. It was in a zone which was otherwise used for cargo and hydroponics. There were no prostitutes, peepshows or other bars, no other sign of anything dedicated to the business of sin and pleasure. Just this ugly five-story structure stranded in an empty sector near the industrial zone.

There were no beckoning lights in the bar's windows. Indeed there were no windows. Presumably because, as sectors went, this was probably one of the most boring and hardly worth looking out upon anyway. Staring up at the building's blank walls, Wufei felt a shiver of claustrophobia crawl up his spine, compounded when he realized that the door was in fact an airlock complete with sniffers. He had to force himself to follow Duo, praying to his ancestors that there were emergency exits somewhere out back. As a minute trickled by in the dark, with Duo humming tonelessly under his breath a foot away, Wufei tried not to imagine what a blaze would do in this closed-up building. It made his burns itch.
"Why are there sniffers into this...place?" Wufei muttered, trying to distract himself from the thought. He'd avoided the word 'fire-trap'; it made it too real. "What are they afraid we'll bring in?"

The one-note humming stopped. Wufei waited. Duo took a breath, but the sniffers opened before he could answer. Wufei stepped out quickly from the confining airlock, getting his back to the wall and taking stock automatically.

The ground floor was one big continuous room, the lighting so sparse that even after the sniffer's darkness, it took Wufei's eyes a few seconds to be able to make out any details. When they did, two words formed themselves in his mind as if they were being chiseled out of ice. Opium den.

The first snarl of revulsion faded as his eyes and nose corrected him. The men and women occupying the beds weren't smoking or injecting anything; most of them were asleep. He saw no pipes, needles or any other drug paraphernalia, and there was no heavy smell of opiates and death in the air. He did smell vomit, piss, unwashed bodies and the thick, fermented odor of sleeping drunks, as well as alcohol, disinfectant, mildew and the smell of cheap food, the kind you found in soup kitchens.

Wufei forced himself to follow Duo as his Handler made his way through the rows of beds. His steps slowed as he examined the slack-jawed faces of the sleepers he passed. Most of them looked drunk, but some were twitching and jerking in a way he was all too familiar with. It seemed that alcohol was not the only poison you could obtain here. So he'd finally found Freeport's wino and junkie population, all in one place. Wufei's lips tightened as his gorge rose. Were they locked in here?

No, of course not. After all, there were sniffers - and hopefully fire escapes - out of this sedated, stinking hell. But the smell...it reminded him of the lockup in Rotterdam, that's why he'd jumped to that conclusion. There was a memory he didn't need, particularly here. He'd had to plunge into the local drunk tank to look for an informant. He hadn't realized that Relena was visiting Rotterdam that day. More to the point, he hadn't realized that, in most civilized areas, the cops rounded up all the drunks, the beggars, the mutterers and the crashed-out junkies, and locked them away during the President's visit. Wouldn't do for a TV camera to accidentally capture a shot of the darling President Peacecraft next to an old, dead-drunk veteran sleeping under a commemorative statue.

Wufei skirted a puddle of vomit and glanced down at the soiled camp bed and the junkie who looked all of sixteen. This was bad. But Rotterdam...the Rotterdam drunk tank had horrified him, and that took a lot of doing after all he'd been through. There were too many people who'd fallen through the cracks of the Peace, and to find them all in one place, locked up ten to a three-man cell...He'd also learned that a lot of cities poisoned the local pigeon population before Relena showed up for a peace march, in case one of those disrespectful birds decided to take a dump on her. Wufei had been all the more disgusted knowing that Relena would have been scandalized at these precautions her entourage were taking. Or at least he thought she'd be. The young girl he'd met and protected that first mad year after the Last War, who'd calmly stared down an armed gunman who'd slipped past Heero and Wufei, that girl would not stand for it.

He wondered how much of that girl was left now; it'd been two years and one election since Une and a presidential attaché had formally forbidden him from going anywhere near Relena.

Wufei shook his head and breathed out heavily, trying to clear the smell from his nostrils and the memories it had triggered from his mind. Duo was already on the far side of the huge open space full of beds, one of them with a couple having unabashed sex right in the middle of the drunk and unconscious. Wufei picked up his step. Duo, who'd not glanced either right or left as he'd crossed the room, started to climb the stairs to the next floor. Loud music filtered from above. Wufei ran three steps to catch up and grabbed Duo by the elbow.
"Duo," he whispered sharply in the ear that was turned his way, "do people have access to hard drugs in here?"

"Define hard. You got pot, booze, some fun chemicals, shit and-

"What chemicals?" If he was likely to run into a guy hopped up on some of the disinhibitors they sold these days, Zerks, he wanted to know about it. He'd seen one of those junkies in the terminal stages break and mangle his own hand ripping it out of a cuff to strangle the officer who'd arrested him.


"And they sleep it off here," Wufei concluded, mind jumping quickly from conclusion to conclusion. "What are the sniffers calibrated for? All of those? This ensures that they can't leave under the influence?"

Duo gave him once more that appraising look that meant that Wufei had guessed more than Duo would have given him credit for. "Yeah. Mainly it's to avoid people taking shit outside, but they're sensitive enough where they won't let you out if you're junked up to the eyeballs. And alcohol. The sniffers won't let you out if you're completely toasted. We already have more fights and rapes in Freeport than we need."

Wufei wasn't surprised by any of this. When Babka was talking about Tolstoy and the Haymarket Eight, one could almost forget that most people in Freeport were psychotics, free spirits, sociopaths, idealists, bitter ex-soldiers, criminals, terrorists, radical anarchists or an interesting combination of several of the above. Violence hung in the air as thick as Freeport's miasma. These people labored long hours in highly dangerous conditions in the shipyards, mines and factories. Then they'd come home and work on maintaining their sectors, or creating goods, food, clothes, utilities, things they and their neighbors needed, and then when that was done they'd take care of the kids or do odd jobs or collect the trash...

The Preventers came down hard on all sorts of drugs, but no government had ever successfully legislated alcohol and violence, the poor man's sedation. And this lawless and overworked population was tailor-made for it. Wufei had been constantly amazed at how relatively peaceful Freeport was compared to the L2 slums. But they'd just encapsulated the drunken violence and aggression and locked it away here, where people went when the toil got too much for them. They'd get it out of their system in a place where they were the only ones who might get hurt, and then they'd leave when they were clean and ready to pick up the burden again.

Duo led him up the stairs. The first floor was a soup kitchen, a huge cooking area with pots upon pots of stew bubbling on them. Half a dozen people stirred them, opened cans, cleaned bowls and served up the cheap fare to anybody who approached the counter. Long rows of metal tables under neon lights seated people in various stages of inebriation, eating quietly. The music was still muffled. It was coming from the next floor up.

Wufei gave in. He just had to ask.

"Food's free, I'm guessing. The beds as well." Of course they were free; everything was free in Freeport. "So are the drugs and alcohol?"

"Yup."

"They'll give them to anyone who asks? Does anybody control quantities?"
"Nope."

"...What's to stop someone from living here? Drinking and injecting upstairs, sleeping in the beds, eating in the kitchen and then doing it all over again?"

"Absolutely nothing," Duo answered.

Wufei thought of the Rotterdam drunk tank, of Neo-Tokyo's child-trade, of methadone clinics for ex-soldiers with so few funds that some of them cut the stuff with illegally obtained heroin just to avoid a riot...

...but no. No, for Chang Wufei, there was never any choice between two evils.

"That's repulsive," he said firmly.

"That's suicide," Duo corrected him. There was a hard edge to his grin.

"Nobody stops them?"

"A good man has buddies to talk him down and out. Ain't easy when he's fallen off the deep end, but we don't - I mean, when it's a friend--...Ah, music's fucking loud in here, the sector's Red Band should come down on that. Nobody could hear the breach siren in this fucking racket."

Wufei examined what he could see of Duo's profile in the gloom and decided he didn't want to know what Duo had nearly said there.

"Does this place push a lot of people to suicide?" The stairs were sticky beneath his boots. He felt contaminated.

"Fair amount." Duo's words were unusually clipped. It might be because he had to talk over the music thumping and screaming out of the speakers as they headed towards the stairs to the next floor. No drinks and drugs here, but the flashing lights, muggy air, the heat and the vibrations in the floor were enough to make one dizzy. People were gyrating and throwing themselves about with the same violence with which they fought in the streets outside.

Duo's voice rose above the racket, hard and apparently uncaring. "You have to keep in mind, some come to Freeport by choice, others end up here because it's their before-last stop."

"Then what the hell's their last?"

"Recyc."

After that final word, an uncomfortable silence settled between them once again, a distance that put Wufei firmly on the 'outside' and Duo 'inside'. Wufei thought that the divide felt a bit artificial today, a bit more defensive than it had on previous occasions. Or maybe that was his own interpretation. Unlike Heero, Duo didn't hide his emotions and thoughts behind an impassive mask; he wore his feelings on his sleeve. And other feelings beneath those and yet more others, ever-increasing finesse and nuance that was at once open yet hard to make out unless, presumably, you knew him very well.

Wufei had become quite good at reading people these past five years. It helped him understand some of the emotions darting through Duo's eyes, across his face, twisting the mobile lips, putting a hunch in his shoulders. But there were always more just out of reach, some of them deep and powerful, dark undercurrents to the bright, brazenly open personality. He remembered wondering the day after his arrival which, of the cheerful friend or the sinister Scissorman, was the 'real' Duo. Now he was starting to think that they both were. Though he couldn't be sure. When Wufei plunged too deeply
into those blue eyes and embroiled, nuanced emotions, he'd end up unsure whether he was understanding Duo better or only reading a reflection of his own thoughts, as if he were staring at a Rorschach blot perpetually shifting before his eyes.

No matter. Today he didn't have the leisure to poke at the mystery that was Duo Maxwell, and that was all for the better...

The third story was the bar where they were to meet their contact. The music shivered the floor, but it was muffled, a cacophony beneath their feet, easily ignored. Nobody danced here. There were all sorts of patrons, from friends enjoying a casual chat over beers to the heavy drinkers at the bar or sitting in corners, nursing it.

Duo led him to the bar. "We got at least thirty minutes before they show up. Beer?"

"I'd rather not." Wufei wasn't at ease. This place was noisy, volatile and more dangerous than the big dorm sectors like Makhno, and they were thirty minutes away from dealing with a middleman for organized crime who might give them crucial information regarding Carver. Wufei could feel a subtle tension from Duo, and it was keying him up. He had no intention of drinking anything.

Duo stepped up to the bar, which was nothing more than a long metal table similar to the ones on which people were eating downstairs. "Two beers please, mate."

The man behind the bar was looking Wufei up and down with the usual Freeport scrutiny, so Wufei hid his irritation as well he could. Presumably Duo didn't want them to stand out by not ordering drinks in a bar.

Two beer bottles thumped onto the table. Big liter bottles, brown glass with the prosaic word 'Beer' on the plain white labels. Nothing else was legal about that label; no clue as to alcohol content or provenance. Wufei had by now deduced that anything without a commercial label - N-bars, frozen dinners, beer, medicine, hardware - had been made in the local factories or been bought ultra-cheap from other colonies by the shipload, packaged in Freeport and distributed in commissaries.

Duo turned and walked away, hands in his pockets. Fortunately Wufei reacted quickly and grabbed the bottles to follow his Handler.

That set the pattern for the next twenty minutes once they'd found a booth deep in shadow where they could both sit side by side, backs to the wall. Duo treated Wufei like his Blade. Everything in his attitude, the way he sat right in Wufei's personal space, which he normally respected, the way he calmly put that restraining hand on his thigh when the ugly fight started, everything was an elaborate act. The beers were part of their roles too. As Wufei had half-expected, Duo was only sipping, with a gesture that made it look like he was drinking more deeply. The level in his bottle barely budged. Wufei imitated him without prompting.

"So, what's upstairs?" Wufei asked quietly, trying to move past the feel of Duo's hand on his thigh. It made him uncomfortable for a whole host of reasons, some of which Duo was probably not even aware of. Duo had meant nothing by it, apart from restraining Wufei from interfering in a sudden fight between drunken patrons...with a little teasing thrown in as bonus.

"What do you think?" Duo countered, taking another exaggerated swig of beer. Great. They were back to the 'entertain me with a guess' game.

"Drug den, brothel," Wufei answered, because he just had to rise to the challenge each and every time.
"Right and wrong." Duo's eyes were tracking every movement, every person coming up the stairs. The fingers that had squeezed Wufei's thigh now tapped lightly on the table before Duo caught and eliminated that unusual nervous gesture. "Drugs and stuff, yeah. But prostitution don't work so well without currency."

I don't see how anything works without currency, Wufei wanted to say. He could understand how a small area functioned; Babka fed Duo, and Chris and Madir gave him 'candy' and fixed his boots, because Duo would probably fix something for them one day, or bring them spices and books and other gifts from outside, or defend them against criminals. The sector was its own little community where everybody knew each other and relied on each other. But Wufei still didn't understand why Hyun had fed them that Korean food the other day when she didn't know Duo from any other hoodlum. There was something here, something that underpinned a lot of how Freeport worked, that Wufei still didn't understand.

Some bystanders had separated the two fighters. One of them was staggering with, at the very least, a badly broken nose and concussion, but he was still willing to fight, straining madly against the arms that held him back. Drunk or drugged for sure. More people stood up and walked over to help keep the two apart. Quite civically inclined for a bunch of lawless anarchists bent only on survival. Then again, they could be in that pinch tomorrow, engaged in a drunken fight and needing cooler heads to stop them before they got themselves killed.

Another fight nearly broke out between two of the peacekeepers, which the two fighters paused to watch. Then everybody got separated, drinks were produced, the bleeding man was carted off to a room to one side, and ten minutes later everybody looked like they'd become fast friends.

Wufei felt the tension radiate from Duo, though he was certain he'd be the only one to notice. Duo's long lashes were brushing his cheeks, apparently looking down at his beer, but his attention was elsewhere.

"Incoming, eleven o'clock," he breathed. His voice was nearly lost in the ambient noise.

Wufei didn't look right away, but he tracked the movement he'd caught in his peripheral vision to keep a bead on the target.

"Small thick guy is Rav's middle man." The words were a quick mutter behind the beer bottle's mouth. "Others are...shit."

Wufei glanced obliquely at Duo. The latter's tension had ratcheted up, but his discreet gaze wasn't directed at the new arrivals.


It didn't take a mind reader to figure out that this man's presence was very much unexpected and not at all welcome.

The middleman's name was Terrence Darbois, according to Duo's quick briefing. A colonist and, as Duo would put it, a spacer through and through; the set of his jaw spoke of an unusual teeth pattern, probably extra molars, a common mutation among spacer populations. He was smaller even than Duo, which accentuated his rotundity. He dodged around groups of drunks who towered over him, his demeanor good-natured and mild. The three men with him, comically taller, didn't look good-natured at all. Bodyguards and walking intimidation. Wufei dismissed them to concentrate on the man following them by a dozen paces. Even without Duo's warning, Wufei would have spotted him.

He was three inches taller than Wufei. His hair was grey, probably dyed, falling in thick spiky locks
sweeping away from his face; gelled stiff, or else he had a quite unusual follicle pattern (when one knew that Trowa's hair fell that way naturally, one no longer judged these things without information). His eyes were wide, heavy and almond-shaped. Some Asian blood in there. Indonesian, maybe. His features were regular; straight, small nose, high, well-defined cheekbones, lips firm, pale but sensuous. Probably not a colony mix, more likely originating from the Pacific rim melting pot. His body and stance screamed 'killer'. Tight, well-maintained muscles under form-fitting biker jacket and pants, wide shoulders on a lean, mean frame. The man moved like a tiger and didn't try to hide it.

Darbois and his men made a side-trip to the bar. The killer approached Duo and Wufei directly and leaned casually against the side of their booth.

"Hi, Duo."

Wufei had expected some form of intimidation. He was surprised by the openly amicable tone and look that went with it.

"Hiya, Mako. How's things?" Duo's tone was friendly too, all signs of tension camouflaged. "You come here to hang out?"

"Heard you'd be here tonight. Just thought I'd say hi. I haven't seen you in nearly a year."

"I didn't think my little meeting with Terrence would reach the high-up of Rav's organization," said Duo, sounding totally casual and relaxed about it.

"Well, it did. Rav sends his regards, by the way."

"Be sure to say hi for me."

"Will do."

Mako's eyes had flickered ever so briefly over Wufei. Too briefly. Wufei felt a prickle of tension across his shoulder blades. That had been nowhere near the Freeport scrutiny that usually dissected him. There was no overt hostility in Mako's stance, though. Maybe the man had heard about him beforehand, judged him unimportant and had just dismissed him from consideration.

"Ah, Maxwell! Long time no see!"

Wufei barely spared Darbois a glance. Let Duo take care of him. The goons were not really that much of a problem either. Wufei kept his attention apparently on his beer, his head down and his arms loosely folded across his chest, and every instinct centered on Mako who'd settled idly leaning against the side of the booth.

The civilities that followed were long and elaborate. Both Darbois and Duo asked each other about a long list of mutual acquaintances. Wufei's impatience peaked and then subsided as he realized this was more than courtesy. This was a delicate prenegotiation, situating each other on the map of the underworld as it were.

"And how's Henry Schwimmer these days?" asked Duo after taking another gulp of beer and belching lightly. Darbois took a sip of his ale and did the same. Wufei managed to keep his fastidious distaste from showing; maybe this was also part of the ritual.

"Henry? He hates the world. He lost a lot of his contacts during that Pig crackdown in the Black Nines."
Duo made a sympathetic sound while Wufei chalked up one for the Good Guys.

"Fucking Pigs, heh? He was one of yours, wasn't he?"

"No, no, we only run dope," Darbois reassured him genially. Wufei took a second to engrave Darbois' features and history onto his list before bringing his attention back to Mako. The killer had done nothing more sinister so far than listen, contribute a few names of friends Duo knew, and pick his fingers with a fifteen-inch hunting blade he'd somehow produced from his tight gear.

"Henry's one of our regular associates, though," Darbois added. "We're not happy to see him in trouble. He peddles hardware, small caliber stuff, and that means we have customers in common. Was he who you wanted to know about?"

The switch to business was abrupt. Duo took a sip of beer before answering. Wufei had the feeling that this turn in the conversation was unexpected.

"I don't know, Dar. If I knew, I wouldn't be talking to you, now, would I? I'm just looking for contacts. I'm sure you heard I have a deal getting set up. I want to unload some delicate cargo."

"This intended for family or friends?" Darbois asked, which was the underworld way of asking 'mob or terrorists'. Wufei would give a year's salary to be able to arrest Darbois and hold him for twenty four hours in an interrogation room.

"Friends. It's that kind of cargo."

"Do you want names in the Nines? Are you looking for a partner or are you just cutting the deal?"

"Just fixing. I don't want to run these myself. You know that's not my style, and Scythe ain't that big. But this customer's a friend of mine, I have to be sure the guys who run his cargo are good mooncursers. I want their CVs. I want references. I want a letter from their moms saying these are serious guys. I want to know every little bump and trouble they had in the Nines in the last six months, and any dealings they had that might queer my trade."

Darbois was silent for a few seconds. Mako glanced up from his manicure. Wufei wasn't sure how to interpret the brief flash of interest in his eyes.

"I see...I guess I could put you in touch with a few people. We've got some canny young lads who just set up new routes, taking advantage of all the disorder-"

"No thanks," said Duo. "I'm sure they're a fine bunch of kids, but I go with experience any time. I want someone who operated before the riots, not some young punk who thinks the shake-up is a good way of getting a rep and some pocket money."

"I see," Darbois repeated.

In the brief silence that followed, Duo's hands fell away from his beer to lie on either side of the brown bottle, fingers loose on the table's surface. The gesture was innocuous, but Wufei didn't like it, or the slight increase in tension it betrayed.

"I have a few names for you," Darbois finally said, fingers crossing over his round belly. "Who did you say your customer was?"

"I didn't," Duo answered shortly.

"You know, a lot of my lads and my associates don't like dealing with a black box. Especially after
all the fuss and muss in the Nines. Maybe a name...?"

"You can call him Mr Long," Duo answered, his voice taking on a dangerous edge. "On account of
him having a long arm, if you see what I mean. He's got a lot of guns behind him and he don't like
questions."

Wufei took a sip of his beer, face carefully neutral. He remembered how Duo had asked him what
'Shenlong' meant, during the war. Apparently Wufei wasn't the only one with a long memory. He
wondered what would happen if you ever forced Duo, gun to his head, to tell an outright lie. He'd
probably hand you the truth in such an underhand way you'd buy right into it. Then he'd kill you.

"Terrence."

Darbois blinked and looked up at Mako. So did Wufei and Duo.

The killer sheathed his knife, slipping it under his jacket into a scabbard in the small of his back.
"Ter, I'm not a freetrader, but even I know you don't ask that kind of question. This is Duo's deal.
Why should he hand you the info to allow you to talk to his customer directly and cut him out?"

"But...Rav said we got to be careful with new deals to the Nines-" Darbois started, voice uncertain,
eyes searching Mako's.

"Yeah, sure. But this is Duo Maxwell. He's got a good rep. I know him, Ravachol knows him. He's
neither stupid nor a stoolie. Capiche?"

Wufei kept himself entirely relaxed. At his side, Duo radiated trustworthiness.

"So get the deal closed already. Preferably outside. This place..." Mako glanced around in distaste at
the bar and its row of barflies.

"Right, right. Sorry, Duo. You know how it is. Come on, let's go outside and get some fresh air."

"...This is Freeport, dude. The air don't get much fresher than this." Duo's hands were firmly
anchored on either side of his nearly-full bottle and he looked unwilling to move.

"I meant, let's go somewhere where we can hear ourselves talk."

Darbois stood. So did his goons. Mako glanced at Duo with a reassuring nod. The latter took his
time taking a last swig of beer. Wufei was probably the only one to notice how Duo's eyes were not
closed as he drank; they were darting from Darbois to Mako and back again. Wufei felt Duo's
edginess. It echoed the prickle of instinct across his back. The bar was noisy, noisome, and another
fight had broken out in the far corner, but Duo and Wufei would have preferred to talk right here in
front of witnesses. Still, they had to follow their one lead.

Duo slowly stood up. Wufei imitated him. They followed Darbois outside, the goons preceding him
and Mako walking behind them all...Wufei idly scratched at the rub mark from his Blade's collar, and
shifted his sword at the same time, making sure it was positioned where he could get it out of its
scabbard and into an enemy's guts in one sweep.

The sniffers let everybody out two by two after their three minute wait. When Wufei and Duo
walked out of the airlock, Darbois made a gesture to Mako and the goons to stay behind. His eyes
included Wufei in the order. Then he walked away, already talking. Duo followed him after a small
hesitation and a flick of the fingers signaling Wufei to wait with the other bodyguards. Wufei tried to
tell him with his scowl just how much he didn't like the idea of Duo wandering away without
Wufei's protection, but the smuggler's back was already turned.
Wufei would have followed if Duo had gone out of his sight, but the two went no further than the far corner of the building. Wufei's eyes swept from Duo to the open space around him and Darbois, then back again. His friend had his back to him, forty yards away, leaning over to listen to Darbois who was speaking in a low voice. They were under a streetlamp, harsh blue-white neon picking up highlights in the leather of Duo's coat. There were no dark alleys nearby, Duo would see anyone approaching from miles away, and Wufei was at Duo's six, guarding his back. No-one would get the drop on Maxwell, not before Wufei could be at his side.

Mako also watched the pair for a moment and then he turned towards Wufei. The killer looked him up and down, the Freeport appraisal to the nth degree. Wufei concealed his surprise and met the stare full on.

A scuffle of boot to his left. Wufei instinctively took a step to the right, then stopped as he felt another of Darbois's goons move to block him off on that side. Mako glanced over his shoulder at Duo, and then took a step forward, placing himself between Wufei and his friend.

Wufei took a step back and found himself in the shadow of the bar. The fourth man was between him and the building's airlock. There was a chain link fence behind Wufei, protecting a hydroponic pod.

It was a trap, Wufei realized with sudden, icy clarity. But Duo wasn't the target.
Wufei cursed his inattention as he felt the chain-link fence loom up behind him. He'd been concentrating on Duo, the man he was supposed to protect. He never thought he himself would be a target. But Mako had taken pains to separate them, and from the way he glanced over his shoulder before closing in, he didn't want to involve Duo, at least not right away; it was definitely Wufei alone he was after. Wufei could have warned his friend with one shout, but if Duo was safer over there...First, Wufei wanted to know what Mako wanted. Once the fight broke out - and Wufei's instincts were telling him a fight was pretty much inevitable - it would take a beam cannon to keep Duo out of it, anyway.

Wufei took a final step back. The chain-link fence pressed against his shoulder blades. He didn't like reducing his range of movement, but he wasn't keen on getting a six-foot goon at his back, either.

Mako watched him thoughtfully, then he glanced at the other men. It was just a brief scowl, but it had whips in it. The other bodyguards fell back instantly. They stayed in a loose ring around the two, though, like beta wolves circling the alpha and a challenger at a respectful distance. Wufei knew they'd stop him if he tried to move away without Mako's explicit permission.

"So you're Duo's new man, hmm?" Mako's voice was just as friendly and relaxed as it had been in the bar. His body language wasn't. "What happened to Heero? You know him? Scary-looking dark-haired guy, blue eyes to kill for...? He's been here on and off for years now. If you know Duo, you must know Heero. Right?"

Why the hell was Mako asking questions when Wufei was not allowed to answer? They weren't rhetorical either, like Babka's gentle musings; the tone was probing, and Mako was staring at him expectantly, head slightly cocked as if to better hear Wufei's response.

"What's your name?" Mako asked after a short silence, once more in a way that made it almost an insult not to answer.

Wufei remained silent. One last check over Mako's shoulder showed him that Duo still looked safe. The smuggler had his back nearly turned to them, facing Darbois who was talking earnestly with many a wide, quick gesture.
Just when he was about to focus on Mako again, Duo suddenly glanced back as if he'd heard a shout. He was frowning. Blue eyes searched for Wufei. The frown deepened as they settled on Mako's back. Duo took a step sideways and caught Wufei's attention, a silent question in the tilt of his head.

Mako's eyes narrowed, though he stayed perfectly relaxed, hands in the pockets of his biker pants. Even with his back turned, he knew Duo was watching; the man had the instincts of a predator, Wufei thought, reluctantly impressed.

There was a naked challenge in Mako's smile. Wufei didn't even hesitate. Duo looked safe, Wufei should keep it that way. He crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back against the fence in a pose that hopefully looked casual if you were thirty yards away and the light was bad. Duo's attention skipped back to Darbois as the other gestured again. Wufei focused once more on Mako, ignoring the small fry around them.

The killer's smile widened, a calculated movement of the lips that put no warmth into his eyes. He put one hand in his thick hair and brushed it back, then he rubbed his neck gently, head to one side. The movement part the open jacket, showing a slice of hard chest. Mako shrugged the jacket off, caught it with his fingers as it slipped down his arms and tossed it to the ground a few feet away. In all that time, his half-closed eyes hadn't left his target.

"I think it was 'Wufei', wasn't it?" Mako finally said, taking the last three steps between them. He leaned forward slowly and put both hands through the links of the fence just above Wufei's head, staring down at the smaller man. Up close like this he smelled of leather and metal.

"Any snot-nosed brat can be a Blade these days," said one of the bodyguards slouching against the bar's wall a few feet away. When Mako didn't discourage him, the thug added in a louder, more provocative voice, "He's as pretty as Maxwell, too."

"Rat-catcher Maxwell," another bruiser muttered, his voice dripping with venom.

Mako smiled again, though his eyes remained perfectly cold and calculating. "Tell me, Wufei, do you like your position as Duo's...Hound?"

There was a sudden burst of greasy chuckling around them.

"Duo's a good-looking guy," Mako added just as Wufei was wondering what was so funny. "I guess I don't blame you for wanting to bend over and be his bitch."

Wufei was going to level a killing glare at the animal for that insult when a flood of little facts fleeted through his mind.

- The way people looked at Wufei when Duo introduced him. Duo dismissing Heero's absence in short, painful words as if the two had had a lover's quarrel. The bed made for two. Babka asking Wufei if he was staying, because Duo was lonely.

Wufei managed to keep his rigid, arrogant mask in place despite a burst of intuition hitting him like a mortar shell. For all Mako had intended the remark as an insult, it wasn't based on a complete fabrication.

Goddamn that Maxwell buffoon! Why hadn't he told Wufei everything that being a Blade implied?! The answer occurred to Wufei almost immediately: Duo hadn't told him because, one, he must have been justifiably nervous of Wufei's reaction at the news, and two, because Duo had expected to be at Wufei's side to field this kind of question if it ever arose.
Wufei tried to search out Duo with his eyes again, but Mako was now blocking his view. He'd have taken Mako on in a fight, but he wasn't sure how he should handle insults. Would Duo be in more danger here or over there? If Wufei shouted, it might distract his friend at a crucial moment and leave Duo open to a quick strike. Was Darbois armed? Were there others nearby?

The questions flashed through his mind to be dismissed just as quickly. His natural inclination was to take care of this himself.

In the background the thugs had finally stopped laughing. They were looking from Wufei to Mako expectantly. It seemed they hadn't had any forewarning of Mako's intentions, but they were all following his lead and expecting a spot of fun.

The killer tilted his head, leaning closer. "I heard what you did in Zapata the other day. Took down all those men by yourself. Friend of mine said he barely saw you move. Like lightning." A faint interest colored Mako's voice. His eyes twitched briefly to Wufei's unbound hair. "Like silk ripping through the air..."

So this guy wasn't one of Ericson's buddies out for revenge. Wufei would have actually preferred that to be the case.

"How long does your agreement with Duo last? I'm assuming you guys have some form of verbal contract, and not just a leash and a collar? I know you're not allowed to talk to me. Just nod. No? Is the leash and collar your thing, maybe?"

Wufei kept himself perfectly still, arrogant gaze plunging straight into Mako's. The bastard was trying to rile him. Fine. Let Mako have his fun insulting a man who couldn't talk back. Looked like Mako wanted Wufei to strike first and take responsibility for the resulting fracas. But Wufei was Duo's Blade; Duo would be the one taking ultimate responsibility for anything Wufei started. And Duo was not the kind to get into a needless fight. No, Duo would laugh off this pitiful baiting and tell Mako to go fuck himself in an amusingly creative way. Wufei couldn't do that, but he hoped his icy silence conveyed the same message.

"Not chatty, is he?" one of the other thugs murmured.

Mako's fingers flexed in the links. He was wearing a short sleeveless t-shirt that wouldn't hinder his movements. It was taut across his chest. The muscles in his arms were tight and lean. He tilted his head. Closer. Breath washed over Wufei's face.

Wufei ignored it. His instincts were prickling. This was...not right...

Mako was very good at masking his battle aura and hiding his intentions, but up close like this, Wufei could read him just that little bit better, and something was off. Mako's eyes were still cold and wary. This...didn't feel like idle baiting leading to a harmless macho brawl. It didn't feel like a seduction or the start of an assault, either. Mako's focus was too great, his tension just that bit higher than it should be. Wufei had the sudden and very unwelcome intuition that Mako was fishing for something in particular.

"You know, I'm always looking for talent on Ravachol's behalf. Something tells me we could work well together. Maybe you could be my Blade when your agreement with Duo is over."

There was a slimy chuckle from one of the others, quickly turned into a cough. It was obvious that this new contract would also be 'with benefits'. Wufei ignored that, he ignored the words; he stared only at Mako. They weighed each other across the short distance still between them. Wufei knew what the killer wanted now.
Mako was on to him.

Not in any detail, perhaps. Since he hadn't attacked Wufei outright, he must only suspect something. So he was trying to get Wufei to betray himself, testing his cover as Duo's Blade.

The danger was much more real than Wufei had thought. He could take Mako down in a fight, but now that wasn't the point. It would be useless to win the battle and lose the war. This required careful handling; his investigation, his life and Duo's were all in jeopardy. A brush of panic tried to wriggle its way through Wufei's control. This changed everything. If this was some sort of test, it would require in depth knowledge of Freeport's tradition that Wufei didn't have-

"Get away from him, Mako."

The words were deadly, spiking ugly echoes off the metal streets and buildings. Wufei knew that voice, though he hadn't heard it since the worst days of the war.

The thugs spun around and fell back immediately, one of them fumbling a shiv from its holster with a nervous jerk. Mako's pupils had constricted abruptly, but only Wufei, up close, could have noticed the instinctive twitch of tension that ran through the muscled frame. The killer looked totally relaxed an instant later. He moved slowly to Wufei's right, but his body and right hand were still caught in the chain link, keeping Wufei pinned against the fence like a rough embrace.

"Hold your jets, Duo. We're just talking."

"Yeah? Tell me how you have a conversation with a guy who can't talk back to you." Duo was a dark promise of violence six feet away. Darbois was coming up behind him, out of breath and looking worried.

"We're getting along fine, if you must know. Body language is a wonderful thing," Mako murmured sensually. "He's quite the catch, you lucky bastard."

Duo's stance lost nothing of its lethality, though the blue eyes did twitch towards Wufei's in a fraction of a wince.

"I'm not going to repeat myself a third time, Mako. Get. Away. From him."

"You're pretty protective." Mako raised his left hand slowly towards Wufei's face. He half-turned towards the Blade, but he was watching Duo out of the corner of his eyes. "Isn't that supposed to be the other way around?"

"Wu, if he lays one finger on you, feel free to rip it off and keep it as a souvenir," was all that Duo said.

Of course Mako didn't stop his gesture. Wufei groaned inwardly. His friend thought Mako was just trying to molest him. Duo hadn't observed the situation long enough to detect its darker, more dangerous undercurrents.

Mako's finger, long, strong and callused, touched Wufei's chin, swept caressingly up his cheek.

Wufei could tell from the way Duo's eyes were flicking from him to Mako to the thugs and back again, like a cornered animal looking for an exit, that a fight with this man would be a costly mistake. It would have consequences, particularly with Ravachol, the crime-lord who might hold the key to their investigation. Wufei stayed still and kept his hands loose at his side, letting Mako sweep his hair back from his face and finger it appreciatively. He would not compromise the justice he'd promised Carver or Duo's life in Freeport for his pride.
"Mako, I'm serious." Duo certainly sounded serious. He sounded one scant second away from murder. His left hand was flexed. A twitch would trigger the spring-loaded sheathe and shoot his stiletto into his palm.

"He's your Blade, Duo, not your toy. Though I wouldn't blame you, man," Mako chuckled. "But I wasn't doing anything wrong. I was just suggesting he might like me as his Handler."

"He's not interested," Duo growled.

"Now, that's not your decision to make," Mako corrected, sleek as a cat cornering a mouse. "You're normally a lot more relaxed. What's got you so uptight? Can't I just talk to the guy? Are you afraid he might be tired of you already? Leave you like Heero always does? Maybe he wants to be the Blade of a man who's going places, not a part-time player like you."

The words were tossed out like casual taunts, but Mako was scrutinizing Duo's reactions as carefully as he had Wufei's. Duo's eyes narrowed as he realized he'd misread the situation. Darbois, off to one side and at a prudent distance, suddenly coughed and started to make a few protesting noises, but both Duo and Mako ignored him and he eventually shut up, looking worried and unhappy.

"He doesn't know you, Mako. You expect him to kill and die for a man he doesn't know?" Duo's voice had shed most of its anger in a flat second. He was speaking coldly, his words were measured. Wufei was now certain that a fight had to be avoided at all cost.

"Oh, I think he does know me." Mako's finger touched Wufei beneath the chin and gently tilted his head until their eyes met. Up close, his irises were grey; their natural color, no lenses. His hair had been dyed to match. The almond-shaped eyes were heavily lidded, the pupils small. Pinpoint eyes. Trapped in the situation like a fly in a web, Wufei stared back at him, expressionless.

"I think we understand each other, warrior to warrior...man to man...You should give him the opportunity to talk with me, Duo. I've got the whole evening free. Why don't you give him permission to go out with me and have a chat? Let him make a choice. That's the one right a Blade has. You do know that...right?"

Duo's sneer was a masterpiece devoid of the slightest hint of hesitation or reluctance. "He's in quarantine," he said, not bothering to answer Mako's last taunting question. "That makes him my responsibility for at least twelve months, maybe more if we don't have another sponsor. That's the way it works when you do things the right way, like a decent citizen should. You do know that, right?"

Mako's eyes narrowed in appreciation at the repartee. He didn't pick up the challenge either.

Duo made a dismissive gesture, as if he really couldn't care. "Sure, in a few month's time, if he's interested, I'll let him meet with you and you guys can talk. If he wants it, and you agree to be responsible for him during the rest of his quarantine, then I won't-"

"Why not now?" Mako murmured. "Why not give us time to get acquainted? Starting tonight?"

"I-"

"Are you afraid to let him talk to me, Maxwell?"

"Why should I be?" Duo scoffed. The fingers of his left hand twitched ever so slightly. Wufei wondered if he actually heard the dagger's spring creak or if it was his imagination.

Wufei wasn't the worst of the Specials unit when it came to undercover work or putting on an act,
but that was only because Heero was working in the same unit and took the prize. However, desperation is the mother of improvisation. Wufei suddenly thought of a way that might possibly get them both out of this without a fight, or would at least get Mako to show his true colors. It wouldn't even be all that hard, though he was loathe to admit it. The hardest part would be to forget he was on a mission for a few minutes...

"You sure look nervous about leaving us alone together," Mako had just murmured. The fingers were back, caressing Wufei's cheek. "You know, Duo--"

The fingers were cool, barely touching his skin. Wufei leaned against them. Mako's attention was instantly back to him. His body was poised to leap away from the strike he was half fishing for. Grey eyes narrowed and lips twitched back from teeth, the smallest movement, a wolf's grin of anticipation.

Wufei focused on those lips. He'd noticed them back in the bar even as he concentrated on the killer's presence and motives. The rest of his features were ordinary, but that straight mouth, full without being wide...that had caught a tiny bit of his attention.

Mako was a skilled fighter; he could read people too. His eyes widened a bit in surprise as he sensed the change in Wufei's attitude.

That mouth would be firm, almost hard to the touch, but the fullness of the lips promised a surprising sensuality...Wufei was ready to bet Mako would look quite exceptional when he smiled and meant it, which he probably didn't do often.

The chain links in Mako's fingers creaked a bit as he tensed. He leaned back, cautiously trying to gauge Wufei's intent and what it meant.

Wufei leaned to one side, widening the gap between them. The distance allowed him to get a better look at the man's body. Well proportioned and strong. Not in an over-muscled way; as sleek and deadly as a drawn arbalest. Nice legs...he'd never had his back turned to Wufei so the latter hadn't been able to judge how well those legs ended, but - Wufei let his eyes trail thoughtfully over the man's hips, and Mako shifted a bit - but he doubted he'd be disappointed.

Wufei reached up and pushed at the arm that was pinning him against the fence. The fingers fell from the chain links. Wufei took a step away without encountering any resistance.

He glanced up at Mako's hooded eyes and he wondered how many men had been killed for fun or profit with those strong, long-fingered hands and powerful arms. The package was handsome, but Wufei didn't like the contents. Mako's eyes narrowed, but he made no move to restrain Wufei as the Blade walked away from him.

Wufei stopped at Duo's side, back still turned to Mako. Duo's mobile face was, for once, indcipherable. He was probably as startled by all this as Mako was, but he hid it better. Wufei lifted his left hand, reached across Duo's chest and placed a finger on his Handler's right shoulder. The start of muscles beneath the coat hopefully went unnoticed by anybody else. He let his finger travel down the so-fine leather, his forearm brushing Duo's chest; this time, the body he was touching didn't flinch. Duo had by this point put together a smirk rich in lingering anger and triumph, an impeccable mask that even Trowa couldn't have found fault with. Wufei ran his fingers down the arm, muscles lithe and wiry compared to Mako's hard, imposing frame. When his fingers reached Duo's right hand, they fastened around the latter's wrist and gave a slight tug.

"Looks like he's made his choice, Mako. Better luck next time," Duo sneered. He turned and speared Darbois in passing with a cold look, a deadly promise to remember this. Darbois shrank back and
made a small gesture of apology which was ignored. Duo's back was already on them all, as if he hadn't any doubt that they would let the pair walk away.

A proprietary hand settled on the small of Wufei's back. He managed to keep himself from jumping about like a startled racehorse by a small margin. Trowa would be downright amazed. The hand was good improvisation on Duo's part, Wufei told himself sternly, trying hard to act like Duo touched him that way all the time. He had to keep up the pretense. They were not out of this yet; Wufei could feel the way Duo's fingers were stiff with tension even through his jacket and shirt. Duo looked relaxed, but his body was a hair-trigger, waiting to spring aside and unleash a deadly retaliation at the slightest sign of an attack at their backs. Wufei forced himself to not glance over his shoulder, though his spine felt like it was being pricked by a dozen tiny needles. They took one step away, two, three - this was too easy -

"Wufei."

They both turned at the hail. Mako was leaning against the chain link fence, arms crossed, relaxed, grey eyes hooded.

"Look me up when you're through with Maxwell," was all he said. He held Wufei's gaze with complete self-assurance.

Wufei kept his expression noncommittal, neither insulting nor promising in case this was another test. He wasn't sure it was, though.

They walked away, alert, ears strained for any sound of footsteps pursuing them. Duo's hand was still at his waist, but Wufei was too keyed up to mind. Behind the wash of adrenaline, his thoughts were beginning to race. How had Mako known? What did he know? Had Wufei managed to pass whatever test the man had had in mind? He scrutinized the dark alleyways of the empty sector that they passed. Duo was doing the same. But nobody followed them, no other bruisers showed up to beat the truth out of them. The seconds of reprieve turned into minutes. The minutes lined up quietly until the pair had nearly reached the airlock.

Their footsteps clanged across a small bridge running over pipes carting water to hydroponics. The instant their feet hit the road again, Duo shouldered him roughly into a dark alley and swung him against a wall. The hand that had rested on his back was now fisting the collar of his jacket. The blue eyes were irate. Duo had been surprised, and he didn't like surprises.

"You're gay?!!"

It was a completely rhetorical question. There was no way Wufei was that good an actor and they both knew it.

"Why didn't you tell me?!!" Duo snapped, affronted. His voice rang with unrelieved strain. Wufei thought there was an echo of hurt behind it, too.

"Why didn't you tell me a Blade is supposed to be the Handler's bedwarmer?" Wufei countered. He deliberately kept his tone down, though it was still a bit acid.

Duo winced. Wufei felt the tremor through the hand on his collar.

"I..." Duo's hand dropped away. He rubbed the back of his neck, scowling. "I didn't expect you to find out. I mean, I didn't expect it to come up."

"How could it not? Apart from Mako, do you think I wouldn't figure out all those hints Babka keeps dropping, or the glares Gilla gives me each time he sees me leave the house alone?"
"Huh? What glares?"

"The 'you break his heart and I'll break your neck' glares." Now that Wufei had all the pieces of the puzzle, he realized he'd been the recipient of that warning look a number of times, from Karl in customs, Gilla, the neighbors, some of Duo's informants...

Duo blinked, obviously surprised he had a dozen people around him who cared deeply for his happiness. Moron.

"Well, it's sort of a misunderstanding. No, normally a Blade is not- does not sleep with his Handler. Some do because they're friends, maybe more, but it's not, er, required."

"Your friends seem pretty sure that we're a done deal," Wufei growled, glancing around, tension still high.

"Yeah, that's because of Heero."

Wufei froze. "Oh," he said weakly. He felt caught strangely off-balance by the news, though he'd been suspecting it for years now, really.

"It was during our very first mission together. Me and Heero had to hang out with this guy to get info, and he tried to foist a couple of girls on us."

"Didn't you tell me Freeport was free of prostitution?"

"Let's not get into details," Duo shot back, rolling his eyes. "Anyway, neither one of us wanted to catch the clap, or have these two chicks hang out with us, or, God help us, follow us home, so in a fit of my usual genius, I said that Heero and I were an item."

"You're not?"

Still on a knife's edge of tension, the question had slipped out. Wufei mentally reached back and gave himself a hard smack on the head for that tactless, inappropriate, nosy remark.

"Me and Heero?" Duo looked at him strangely. "No, mate. Not by a mile. Was that what you thought?"

"No," Wufei answered too quickly. "I mean, it's none of my business, it's not for me to-"

"Oi, don't go off in a spin, I got it. No, me and Heero are just good friends." Duo fingered his braid absenty. His eyes were flickering left and right, his ears obviously pricked, but the question appeared to have derailed his attention. He looked momentarily absorbed in some thought, before he shook his head abruptly.

"Nope, nothin' between us, never was, never will be. But after that lil' episode with the skirts, I put about that I was having this stormy on-off relationship with Heero - non-exclusive, of course, so I could still get laid from time to time, but it came in handy to explain why he comes and goes so much, and why I didn't have any other Blade in the meantime. Your arrival kinda queered that. But I never thought that story'd got around that much, or that anybody'd think that you and me were- were-Jesus, I can't even say it with a straight face. Um, why am I not dead yet?" Duo rubbed the back of his neck and peeked at Wufei from the corner of his eyes. Wufei could have sworn there was a slight hint of color on his cheeks in the reflected glare of neon from the nearby street.

This was such a perfect opportunity to jerk Duo's chain, but Wufei didn't have the heart for it. "Because I doubt that's what got us into this fix tonight," he sighed.
Duo suddenly looked gloomy, an expression matching Wufei's.

"I don't flatter myself that Mako was that interested in me," Wufei muttered. "Odds are better that this was some kind of test. He was trying to trick me into talking to him before going for provocation. I think he suspected I'm not really your Blade. I'm not sure what he thinks now."

"Hell, after you pulled that one outta your hat, I'm not sure what I think now," Duo said drolly. Then he grew serious. "Yeah, that's how I read the situation too. Damn, I wish I'd seen it coming. I knew Darbois was up to something, but it didn't feel sinister. I just thought he was going to try to gouge me on commissions. In fact I'd bet my rep that Dar didn't know what Mako was up to. Not in detail. I've got connections, and Darbois is too smart to make that kind of enemy. Besides, if Dar had known, I'd have smelt it on him, and we'd have never even left the bar unless they dragged us out fighting. I certainly wouldn't have agreed to talk to him privately, leaving you back with the goon squad."

Duo's eyes were gleaming in the reflections off a streetlamp, probably reviewing the scene and dissecting every nuance from it. "The way he was talking...he's very good at saying nothing in a long-winded way, is our Terrence. It took me a few minutes to see he was pissing in the wind, and then it took me a few more to realize where the problem was. Mako, now...I'm not sure. He's harder to read. Whatever he knows, he didn't tell Darbois. Let's hope that means he knows very little. If Mako or anybody knew who you were for certain, you'd be dead already. I wonder what Rav's playing at...Damn, I hate surprises. Which reminds me I'm still mad at you for springing that whopper on me," Duo added, turning back towards the street.

"Is it going to be a problem?"

Duo glanced back from the mouth of the alley. "Problem? If we made it onto Rav's radar for whatever reason, particularly you, then yeah, that'll be making life somewhat interesting. We'll work around it somehow."

"I meant my sexuality. We live in close quarters," Wufei said stiffly.

Duo snorted. 'I'd 've been happier if you'd warned me, buddy. I might not 've been so quick to show you the goods in the shower the other day. Is that why you shot out of there like a scalded cat? Afraid you'd be tempted by the candy?"

"Maxwell!" Wufei snapped, scandalized that Duo would think—though of course he was somewhat correct. If Wufei hadn't been attracted to his own gender, Duo could have dropped that towel and Wufei wouldn't have given a damn. "I would never- to think that you'd believe-"

"I'm teasin' ya, Fei." Duo had that impish grin on his mug again. "You caught me a bit off guard, though. You don't have any other shocks in store for me, do you? You don't dress up like a dame on Sundays, right? 'Cause that would stop my ticker dead."

Wufei gave the joker the glare he deserved for that suggestion.

"Nah, don't worry your pretty head about me getting all hostile with you," Duo smirked, voice brimming once more with his usual self-confidence, cheerfully fighting off any residual tension from the near-miss with Mako. "Whether someone likes tits or tail is none of my bizz. Duo Maxwell's always walked both sides of that street, if you know what I mean. Hell, maybe you're the one who should be worried about living with me, not the other way around."

Wufei scorned the wolfish smile taunting him. "I could chop you down to size in my sleep and you know it."
"Dark and deadly, just my kinda guy. Mako was right, you are quite the catch."

"Idiot."

"You should have yelled for me," Duo grumbled, then nodded his thanks as Wufei handed him a bottle of juice. They were still too stressed to sleep.

Wufei shrugged as he sat down on his bedroll. Duo hadn't sounded all that reproachful. In Wufei's position, he'd have done the same thing: played the situation and tried to get out of it by himself. Hell, he had done the same thing or damn well tried to, when he'd nearly challenged Ericson to a duel the other day. Quatre had hammered them into some sort of team by the end of the war, but by nature they were still as cooperative as tigers prone to toothache. Even the fight in Zapata hadn't been real teamwork. They'd been both fighting individually, with nothing more than a blind spot where they trusted the other would watch their backs. Quatre would have been banging his head against the sector wall after he'd dispatched his own share of attackers. Actually, no, that wasn't true. Quatre had shed some of his tendencies to blame himself for everything. He'd have banged their heads against the sector wall, in the nicest of ways of course.

Wufei's mouth twitched into an involuntary smile around the neck of the bottle. His body still felt like one large surface area of snarled-up nerves. It'd been primed for one hell of a fight and then left hanging. He took a swig from his own bottle. The tart fruit juice chased away the lingering taste of beer and adrenaline that coiled in his throat.

"Do you think I broke my cover?" he asked, carefully rubbing the moisture of the bottle from his palm onto his thigh as if it required the sort of attention piloting Nataku once had.

"We're still alive," Duo muttered. The way his fingers kept tapping against his bottle spoke of the same surfeit of nervous energy Wufei felt.

"Did I do anything to make Mako suspicious, I mean? By not calling you over? Or-"

"He was already suspicious. I don't think you made it worse. The fact he let us get away that easily...I don't think he's gonna forget about this completely, but maybe you threw him off the track a bit, making doe eyes at him like that."

The juice turned bitter in Wufei's mouth. He'd been very aggressively trying not to think about that. Of course he was glad he'd managed to get them out of the situation without a fight. He might even have managed to allay Mako's suspicions somewhat. But he didn't like the coin he'd used to pay for the reprieve. Sex was an innocuous pleasure he indulged in only between missions; the rest of the time he sternly abstained. That repression had become instinctive, and he was proud of it. On a mission he was observant, impartial and not to be swayed by any weakness, his own or others. He was distantly surprised he'd managed to relax enough to play the part tonight. He feared that the reason for his success was that it hadn't been entirely an act. Mako would be pretty much the kind of man he'd be interested in, well, except for the fact that the guy was a criminal and a killer. But those details aside, that mixture of toughness and sensuality, the confidence and emotional self-containment...and that mouth... Mako had looked interested too at the end. Wufei couldn't figure out if that made it worse or not.
"Of course, I'm glad nobody was around to take a picture of me with my jaw hanging around my knees when you leaned back and-

"It was the only way I could think out of the situation," said Wufei, interrupting what was sure to be another cringe-inducing replay of his performance. "I wasn't sure if I could retaliate without breaking my cover. Besides, if I'd killed him-

"Mako's a tough son of a bitch. Just thought I'd mention that," said Duo in an aside.

"If I'd killed him, that would have compromised our relation with Ravachol's organization."

"Hell, yeah. Rav and Mako are friends. I don't mean, Freeport-type 'friends', as in acquaintances who trust each other. I mean real friends. Which is funny, 'cause Mako used to be one of the Alliance's spooks and Rav was a colonist rebel. War makes strange bedfellows, but peace ain't that bad at it either. Not that they're sleeping together. Ravachol is straight. I think Mako's bi. And Darbois loves big-breasted red-heads who-

"I'm more interested in how compromised you think my position is rather than in everybody's preferences," Wufei ground out.

"They don't know you're the heat - relax, I scanned for bugs as soon as I walked through the door. I do it regularly anyway. This place is clean. Anyway, if they knew that much, you'd be recycked by now, my friend."

"He asked me about Heero. He asked me if I knew him. It might have just been a way of getting me riled. He didn't say anything pertinent."

"Hmm." Duo bit his lip and stared at the ceiling. "I can't think how Rav noticed us."

"Our enquiries?"

"All fairly standard for the type of route I'm trying to set up. It looked like Darbois wasn't buying that one from the start, though. He asked some funny questions too, though not quite as aggressively. I'm starting to think Terrence had been instructed to keep away from deals in the Nines, if not me specifically. This really smells fishy. And it don't add up. The only way this situation could be any freakier was if it wore glasses and its hair in twin buns."

"She's not that bad anymore. Quite stable these days."

"Glad to hear it."

"You said your enquiries were fairly standard."

"I am trying to find Carver," Duo pointed out with dry amusement. "I'm asking questions that will lead us to him. But I'm spreading them around. Rav wouldn't-..."

Tap-tap-tap, his fingers danced along the bottle.

"What?" Wufei asked as the silence stretched.

Duo was staring blindly across the room, eyes narrowed and unseeing. "Rav wouldn't notice them and put them together unless he was paying specific attention to anybody who might be asking his runners slightly unusual questions about recent trips outta the Nines. Questions that could, as it happens, lead to a certain hitman who landed here in the last two months."
Wufei digested that in silence.

"You mean, Carver could be working for this Ravachol guy?" he finally concluded.

"I wouldn't think so. Rav's into drugs while Carver kills people. They're not mutually exclusive, but then again- What was Carver's last job, on L2-X953?"

"The one we know about? The leader of a resistance cell and his second in command, who also happened to be his lover. Mind you, they were together at the time, so her death might have been collateral damage."

"A resistance cell? Resistance to what?"

"It seems to change on a regular basis," Wufei answered sardonically. "The only thing they seem to agree on is that Relena shouldn't be involved in their politics. 'Prevent Peacecraft!' is their rallying cry, which is more stirring than grammatically correct."

"And Carver whacked this idiot?"

"Yes. We assume a rival terrorist group hired him. There were indications of it. Ironically, if they wanted to take the lead of the overall resistance in that part of the cluster, they made a strategic mistake. The third in command of that particular cell was a nutcase by the name of Mandsom. He took over and did a little fricassee of leaders of various factions. A week later, we had a riot."

"Fucking splinter groups. This is why I bloody well worked alone during the war."

"Seconded," said Wufei, lifting his empty bottle a fraction in a small salute.

"Still, that's got nothing to do with Ravachol. If Carver had exed a drug lord, I'd see the connection..."

"Maybe Carver just paid Ravachol to cover his tracks, and Ravachol is giving him his money's worth."

"...Maybe." Duo didn't look convinced. "Don't know why Mako went after you, then. I'm the brains of this outfit. You're just the brawn."

Wufei leveled another glare at the smirk hovering over the bed. It had absolutely no effect. When he got back, he'd corner Yuy and ask him to teach him a few tricks.

"So what do we do now?" he groused.

Duo stood up, stretched and yawned, his juice bottle carelessly tilted at a dangerous angle. "Now, we're going to bed. We been up more than eighteen hours."

"I meant-"

"Then tomorrow, we go on working the case."

"How hard will that be?" If Ravachol was on to them...

"We'll just have to see!" Duo exclaimed, his grin one of feral anticipation. "But I have other avenues into Rav's organization, and Darbois owes me now."

"He does?"
"'Course. You don't mess with a man's right hand like that, it's bad form. Especially on the sly. If Mako didn't tell him what he suspects, then I have Terrence by the balls. If Mako did tell him afterwards, I might be able to worm it out of him. We'll see. Say, Wufei? Mind if I ask you a personal question?"

"Yes," Wufei grunted, leaning forward on his bedroll to slip off his scabbard.

"Did you ever sleep with Heero?"

Wufei froze in the act of pulling his jacket off. "What?!"

"Heero. Pilot 01. The other dark and deadly in your team. Did you ever-"

"No- what possible business could it be of yours?!"

"I just wondered," Duo answered without taking offence. He was standing near the kitchen counter, the empty bottle dangling forgotten from his fingers. "I...worry about him. You know? And the way he talks about you...He lets so few people get close to him. It never occurred to me before 'cause I assumed you were as straight as a linear equation, and also I thought Heero would tell me. But as it turns out, though he mentioned your work and your brilliant arrest record and your tendency not to suffer fools, he never bothered to mention you were- he does know you swing that way, right?"

"Yes, but I would not think he'd tell you," Wufei answered primly. "This is something private."

"Private. Right. From there to assuming he wouldn't tell me if you two were boning each other, there's no distance," Duo added sourly, leaning against the kitchen counter and glaring at his workbench as if he'd caught it withholding secrets. "So I guess you won't tell me if he's seeing someone? Just to put my mind at ease about the emotional wellbeing of my best buddy?"

Wufei hesitated. It shouldn't be difficult to brush Duo's query off with another "none of your business"...but Duo was looking at him now with a searching gaze that had something wounded in its depth, and Wufei found himself muttering "not that I know of" without quite his conscious volition.

"You don't know?" Duo looked startled. "You work with the guy day in and day out!"

"Yuy and I have a...sort of agreement. We don't meddle in each other's private lives."

"Well that's just sad," Duo muttered, hurling his bottle into the garbage can where it clattered angrily.

Wufei stared at the sword gripped loosely in his hand. He was as proud of being Heero's battle-hardened brother-in-arms as he was of his detachment during a mission. But when he faced the pain and incomprehension in Duo's eyes, the quality of his friendship suddenly felt tepid and distant. Because Wufei was worried too, sometimes...

Maybe it was because he saw Heero day in and day out that he could lull himself into thinking his competent friend was mostly alright. If Heero had said but one word, Wufei would have rallied to him in a second, but Heero never said anything, or was anything less than his extraordinarily proficient self. So maybe there was nothing to worry about at all. Right? The blue eyes searching his told him otherwise, and Duo hardly ever saw Heero at all. And Wufei couldn't lie to himself under that steady gaze. He knew Heero had a problem, even if he couldn't even begin to define it. But with his bloody reserve and propriety giving him no leave to breach the silence, Wufei had gratefully accepted their unspoken agreement never to talk about any truly personal matter. Maybe that's why he'd been so quick to pair Heero off with Duo in his mind; to allay some of his worry, and tell himself he wasn't really failing a friend...
"Did you ever want to?" Duo asked suddenly with a fake leer that looked utterly pro forma.

"Want what?"

"Meddle in his private life? Or be a part of it?"

Wufei didn't bother to get back on his high horse. "No. To tell you the truth, I'm not even sure I know Heero's sexual orientation."

"Yeah, that's what worries me too. Nobody seems to know, including Heero." Duo grimaced. "He...I don't know. My Sweeper instincts prickle when he's around. I wanna put space-beacons all around him. Warning! Dangerous Material Adrift In Space! At one point, I kinda tried..."

Duo's eyes flashed to Wufei's and dropped away. His mouth moved a few times, and then he laughed. If it was an attempt at lightening the mood, it failed; it was harsh with an undercurrent of self-contempt. "At one point I was going to drag him into bed just to make sure he knew it was a fun activity for two, but I chickened out. He...he just keeps it all close to his chest. I think once you breach that shield, it'd be for ever and I...well, I was afraid of doing more harm than good. I didn't think he'd understand- but I'm worried about him. He's my best friend."

The last was said with a pugnacious glare at Wufei, daring him to criticize Duo's small moment of self-preservation or to doubt the quality of his friendship because of it. Wufei felt hardly worthy of doing either.

"He's my best friend too. But we each have to find our path. He knows that if he needs my advice or my help or... anything else, he can ask. That's understood."

"Funny we have this best friend in common and we hardly know each other," Duo mused.

"Yes."

"I blame the best friend, myself. I am so gonna kick his ass when I see him again! How could he not tell me you're batting for the other team?! That's like, the news of the fucking century! I mean, say it with me, people! Chang Wufei, Mr 'Straight And Narrow' himself, is gay!"

Wufei rolled his eyes, but strangely enough, it was a smile rather than annoyance he was fighting down. Duo was back to making his wide, dramatic gestures. The smuggler shook things off quickly, unlike a certain L5 Preventer who could be said to brood a bit too much over things he could do little about.

Despite Duo's clowning around, there was an uneasy feeling in the air as both men got ready for bed. Duo checked the locks twice, and stood back to look at the door for a few seconds. Then, with a sigh, he went to his laptop and typed in a few words.

"If you want to go to the bog during the night, don't. Or else, type in the password. It's the first nine number of the Gaussian gravitational constant, with a star instead of the second zero."

"You have a security net?"

"Yep. I don't use it normally."

"Why not?"

"Cause Gilla sometimes taps on the window's shutters on his way to the commissary to see if I want anything, and I hate waking up with an adrenaline jolt when the alarm goes off in my ear. I prefer
"The way you drink coffee, adrenaline is probably healthier."

"Jesus, what is this, you and Babka part of a league against my coffee?"

After one minor spat over the benefits of green tea versus tar-like coffee, the two were in bed, trying to sleep. Wufei shifted in the sleeping bag, his hand checking his sword of its own volition for the third time. He thought about Heero. Then he stopped. He was the last person in the universe to solve someone else's problems of introversion and self-imposed isolation. That was just too much irony for even his stomach.

It was Lance he went to sleep thinking about, with a touch of longing. Which was strange; he never did that on a mission. Even when he wasn't on a mission, he rarely thought of his occasional lover until Lance would finish whatever involving research project he was working on, sleep for twenty-four hours, and wake up in an empty room, alone and horny. If Wufei wasn't away on a mission, he'd find Lance on his doorstep. He'd show up again for a few nights, each time looking more rested, until another brilliant idea dragged him away again...

Wufei tried to push the thoughts and feelings away. Lance didn't belong in this cold room, in the perpetual darkness of this colony tainted with wild freedom and violence. He was part of Wufei's orderly, regulated life back in the real world, where sex was a nice exercise in sensuality that involved only camaraderie, and the rest of his time was dedicated to a cause.

It was this bloody place. Freeport. It got everything mixed up; the investigator, the scholar, the sensualist, the warrior, the Preventer, the one-time soldier, the friend...it was as if the anarchy the colony was so proud of had crept into his soul and had broken down all the regimented barriers between his different selves, reveling in the chaos.

He hoped they'd find Carver quickly. The sooner he left this Bedlam, the better.
"La grâce de tes mouvements
Belle danseuse de l'Orient
Paroles poésie
Remplies de nostalgie
Les charmes de ton corps
Danses royales du Cambodge
La fleur du Laos
Ton coeur est une rose

Tu chantes résistance
D'un monde en souffrance
Sous les drapeaux rouges sang
Ont fuit les éléphants
La grâce de tes mouvements
Belle danseuse de l'Orient"

(The grace of your movements
Beautiful oriental dancer
Words and poetry
Filled with nostalgia
The charms of your body
The royal dances of Cambodia
The flower of Laos
Your heart is a rose

You sing for resistance
In a suffering world
Under blood-red flags
The elephants have fled
The grace of your movements
Beautiful oriental dancer... )
---Beruriers Noirs, 'Danseuse de l'Orient'

The hammering on the door rang in his sleep like machine gun fire. The squeak of the alarm from the laptop was an urgent counterpoint. Wufei was half out of the sleeping bag, sword unsheathed, before he was fully awake.

His eyes darted around the room, scrutinizing shadows. One of them was moving. Duo ghosted towards the door in such complete silence that Wufei almost doubted his eyes for a second. A saw-toothed blade in Duo's left hand cut the streetlight shining through the shutters.

"Duo?" The voice, muffled through the door, preceded another round of loud knocking.

Duo relaxed and moved more naturally without the silence and deadly intent of a knife. Wufei, prompted by the change in his ally's body language, stood down as well and sheathed his sword.
"Petey, for chrissakes, stop before you wake up the whole sector," Duo grumbled. He opened the door a wedge and checked the corridor outside with a swift glance, before throwing it fully open.

"Sorry mate, I'm in a hurry. I'm gonna miss the shuttle."

"Off to the shipyards?"

"Yeah. Look, I tried to get that info for you, but-" Petey glanced over his shoulder then around the room, and continued in a whisper.

Wufei headed towards the kitchen area, his eyes on the coffee maker. He and Duo had spent the entire previous day walking all over the docking rings, and they'd gone to sleep only five hours ago. He put the coffee in, then remembering how Duo liked it, trebled the amount. He didn't actually want any of the poison; the smell alone would be enough to wake him up.

The coffee burbled as Duo closed the door. Wufei took one look at the uncharacteristic frown on his friend's face and drew his own conclusions.

"That good, hm?"

"Yeah, another dead end."

Wufei rubbed his face. It had been four days since that near-fight with Mako and nothing had cropped up. In a way, that was good. Wufei had been expecting a lynching party every time he turned a corner. He'd spent four days jumping at shadows and flinching at the many loud sounds in Freeport. Four days of nerves coiling every time someone gave him the Freeport Look for a second longer than seemed normal.

The mob bearing tar and feathers failed to materialize, but so did any further information. Terrence Darbois had left Freeport on a 'vacation' the very day after the Mako incident. Duo had sworn fit to peel the paint off the walls when he'd heard about that. Every other source in Ravachol's organization had completely dried up, not that Duo dared press too hard. Even Duo's informants couldn't get anything out of the gang; the gag order was quite thorough. So far it hadn't been possible to determine if it was general or aimed specifically at Duo and his friends.

"What now?" Wufei asked, shoving a cup of coffee at Duo who was scratching his abs through his ragged black t-shirt with the dazed air of someone who could have used more sleep.

"Keep on digging," Duo answered with a morose shrug. Then he grinned, his usual cheerfulness and self-confidence rising to the fore at the first whiff of the thick brew in the cup. "Rav's men aren't talking, but I know others who will. People who'll have seen Carver's ship come in and allowed him entry into Freeport. Like most freetraders, I'm friendly with the guys who volunteer for customs. And they love me on the flight deck!"

Wufei looked at him dubiously, remembering just how much they loved the smuggler on the flight deck.

"Give me a couple hours and we'll hit the streets, start looking along those lines." Duo glanced at his watch. "I have to wait for a repair job from Monique, something else broke in the-"

"Duo, we don't have the time for that!"

"I don't have to fix it today, I just need to make sure I'm here to pick up the broken rotor when her runner drops it off. I'll fix it in my spare time," Duo replied, conciliating.
That meant that he'd fix it instead of sleeping one night. Duo's day-to-day schedule, in conjunction with the needs of the mission, made for a brutal timetable even by Wufei's excruciating standards. Wufei didn't particularly want his informant burning out on him, but his protest was firmly cut off by a wave of Duo's damaged hand.

"This is important, man. For the investigation too. Monique is a...well, she's a tartar, she'd give wartime Une a run for her money, but she's a power in this place. And she's got a tab with me now. She's the person who organizes the repairs and maintenance for anything that flies in and out of Freeport. Her and her crew know everything there is to know about which ship comes in from where and in what state."

"Sounds like she's in charge of a lot," Wufei asked, interested despite himself. "Who decided she gets to have a say in all that?"

"She did," Duo informed him dryly. "And nobody, and I mean nobody, has had the balls to tell her otherwise. She's not 'in charge', like, officially. But she's got the memory and skills of several computers networked together. She's just the best for the job. That's how most people get steady work like this." Duo jerked thumb at the mechanic's workbench behind him in illustration. "By being so good at them that they'd be wasted on the shipyard floors."

"And I guess she'll help us with information only if you help her with her repairs."

"That's the way the world works, man. Or you could try serving her with a subpoena. I'll send your remains to Tro."

"Very well," Wufei grumbled, caving in with bad grace. "And if she can't help us?"

Duo had set down his coffee to pull his prosthetics glove onto his right hand, twisting the neural connector into his biceps. "We got other avenues," he answered briskly. "I'm already tracking Carver through the usual rumor mill, and I've put out a few feelers into Freeport's assassin's network." His eyes remained thoughtful, focused on numerous threads of inquiry. His fingers started their daily routine, re-doing his sleep-mussed braid on automatic. "If the freetrader side completely seizes up, we'll hunt for the fucker the old-fashioned way. Find out how he gets his jobs, set a trap, bait the bastard out, nail his ass. I just gotta come up with a really, really good reason why a smuggler like me would want to hire a hitman, 'cause- " Duo interrupted himself with a gigantic yawn.

"Two hours to wait," he said once he got his jaw under control again. "I coulda used the sleep."

"Slip back into bed. I'll keep an ear out for the door," Wufei offered, rooting around his knapsack for his thin sandals. Then he remembered the state of the scrapyard outside and decided to wear his boots instead.

"Nah, no point," Duo muttered into his brew. "After that wake-up call, I'll never get back to sleep."

"Have breakfast then."

Wufei pulled on a tight tank-top instead of the loose sweat he'd worn to bed, and bent down to fasten his boots.

"Whacha doin', Fei?"

"Going out back," Wufei answered shortly, grabing his sword.

"Why? You've already cleaned out the yard twice. I don't think it's ever been that spotless."
"Exercises."

"Oh."

Duo didn't take the hint of Wufei's curt responses and trailed after the Preventer, blinking sleepily. Wufei resisted the urge to shoo him back inside, knowing that would only encourage him. Instead, he took an extra long time with his warm-up exercises. Sure enough, after ten boring minutes Duo went away without any prompting. He left the door open a few inches. It wasn't that much warmer inside the room than in the yard outside, and the quality of the air was the same everywhere in Freeport: it was air with a great deal of personality.

Wufei heard the rustle of clothes as Duo got dressed. Then a swivel chair creaked in the room and an object on the workbench was picked up with a slight scrape of metal on metal. After a few seconds, a regular squeaking shivered the silence, a wrench attacking a bolt. The small sound was drowned out by a banshee screech of cables and the ratchet of a crane coming from the sector wall a few blocks away; supplies being hauled up from the cargo area.

Wufei glared at the wall in the rough direction of the noise. He'd jumped again. He still wasn't used to the sudden bursts of racket in this hell-hole. Duo never even glanced up. It was galling. Wufei expected better discipline of himself. All he had to do was forget the deadly little tango of ships around the hub and rim of the colony; the chances that one of them would spin out of control and crash into Freeport. Forget the probability of twenty tons of rogue steel and fuel cells ripping open the fragile metal skin of the wheel and exposing them all to agonizing death. Piece of cake.

He shook his head and breathed deeply, banishing the little prickle of tension that clung to him still. The air was rich with the scents of metal, chemicals, sewage and life. It might smell like cesspit perfume, but it was real in his lungs. He forced himself to relax and forget about accidents and killing vacuum. The perpetual stress and the frustrations of the investigation were getting to him. He needed the Wushu, he needed to connect to the still, calm center of his soul.

Banishing the clattering noise and distant shouts of workers from his mind, he took up a stance in the middle of the cleared-out part of the yard, hands at his side, body loose. He let his eyes focus on an empty spot beneath the netless basketball hoop, breathed deeply and started to move.

The Tai Chi forms loosened his muscles and rounded off his warm up. His mind started to flow from the rigid straight lines of mission-mode while his feet drifted over oil stains and metal shards. The grace of the open-hand forms felt foreign against the backdrop of the junkyard. The very contrast was intriguing. He watched his own hands move, detached, admiring the strange beauty he was creating in this setting. The calm and concentration touched his soul. It focused him on the here and now; on feeling; on drawing one breath after another. His body occupied the space between the junk piles in precisely controlled movements which gifted him with a deep sense of inner freedom.

He held the final form for a few minutes, breathing evenly, letting aggression and worry flow out into the ground. Light crept into his body through his lungs, energy warmed him, flowed through him.

His sword sang a short, sweet note as he drew it. He loved that sound. Light played on the blade, a gleam of hard purity in the murky darkness, slicing the thick air and all the doubts and frustrations.

There had been a small thunk from the room when he'd drawn his sword and now Wufei felt a prudent pair of blue eyes observe him from the shadows around the partially open door. They flicked over his saber and scrutinized the yard, looking for enemies. Wufei went to put down the scabbard as well as his cast-off tank top. No need for words. Duo would read reassurance in the way Wufei moved.
"Aren't you cold?" Duo quizzed, opening the door wide and leaning against the frame, his eyes still scouring the corners for possible danger.

Wufei shook his head. The calm and composure of the ritual warmed his body, eased his soul.

He heard Duo grunt and go back into the room. A movement of air brushed against Wufei's skin; it chilled him slightly. A shiver tried to scurry up his arms. He shook himself and brought up his sword into the first form.

He fell back quickly into his familiar routine. The blade drew him into the Tai Chi Dao and he followed like a dancer with his partner.

As he held the 'Striking the Tiger' form's slow kick, he felt/heard Duo's quiet return. His mind and body flowed into the measured, controlled and elegant moves, following the blade, and he didn't even consider stopping. There was something in the silence now, something that chimed in harmony with his serenity and concentration. He somehow knew that Duo would not interfere or distract him. His friend would watch in silence with the eyes of the warrior that existed side by side with the cheerful smuggler. And Wufei found he didn't mind the company as much as he normally would.

The world started to blend, to become a coherent entity. The smell of coffee, the swish of the sword, the crackle of an N-bar wrapper, the brush of boots on metal; each took their place, like one heartbeat following the next. It felt complete, and right.

His dao whispered a beautiful song as he whipped it around, 'Pushing the Boat with the Current'. In the background, Duo jumped at the suddenly abrupt movement and then coughed quietly on a bit of energy bar. Wufei's lips curved in the slightest of smiles. He didn't hide it behind a mask. There was no repression here, only control.

He came back to first position, fists at his side, sword straight and still despite its weight. He breathed deeply, letting the cold air fill his lungs. He didn't look towards the doorway where Duo was sitting on the stoop. Let him watch. His sword was already tempting him into the set of forms that were unique to his clan: the Dragon's Wushu.

His feet fell into the moves. They followed the footsteps of his father, brushing the grass of Master Li's temple. Wufei's grandfather had followed these forms under the orange trees that had been coaxed into blossom on a broken-down colony. His great-grandfather had swung this same sword through the clean crisp morning of a Chinese springtime. His ancestors had followed this ritual over the hallowed stones of an Emperor's palace and the dirt of battlefields; on the wooden floors of practice halls and in small gardens and temples.

His thoughts darted like the sword. The Dragon Wushu of his clan was not the slow, meditative steps of Tai Chi Dao; they were rapid, deadly forms designed to enhance a warrior's strength and battle spirit. He was one with the sword, one with the graceful, murderous movements, he was even one with the junk-filled yard and the biting cold air.

There hadn't been any more sipping noises from the mug since he'd started, though when he spun and darted into 'Dragon Fighting Phoenix', a two-fold blow as fierce as it was graceful, he heard the liquid slosh and spill as Duo started.

His mind spiraled, tighter and tighter into the finish, body and being drawn into the final moves, violent, lethal, beautiful. The final slash was a catharsis, as always.

He straightened from the last lunge slowly. The final form was borrowed from the Tai Chi Dao. It was meditative, calming. He finished, bowing to the enemy he'd cut to ribbons, to his ancestors and...
to the terrible beauty which lived in the heart of each man. Then he sank to his knees, dao across them, eyes closing of themselves. Meditation was the logical conclusion to the final liberating moves and the slow step down into the last form.

The scrapyard and the silent presence on the stoop came back to him in pulses, in time with his slowing heartbeat. His senses were heightened by the Wushu. He could tell just by the way his skin prickedled that Duo was still sitting on the doorstep and staring at him. Wufei peeked through his eyelashes, momentarily setting aside the gathering threads of his meditation.

Duo’s elbows were planted on his knees and he had the mug frozen halfway to his mouth. The blue eyes were wide. He was staring at Wufei, who wondered what his burn scars looked like under the harsh yard lights and trickles of sweat. The suddenness and strangeness of that thought caught him off-guard. He hardly ever wondered about his appearance any more.

Though his position hadn’t moved from the relaxed stance of meditation, and he’d been looking at the other man through the barest slit of eyelids, hidden by sooty lashes, Duo nonetheless blinked and lowered the coffee cup, the blue eyes darting to Wufei’s. The barest flush brushed his spacer-pale cheeks.

Duo stood up quickly and turned. "Jesus, don’t tell me you're going to sit like that!" he exclaimed, already inside the room. "You ain’t got the sense God gave a kitten! You’ll catch your death, sweating in this cold. Get you a towel-" the voice faded.

Wufei stared at the empty doorway, then he frowned and closed his eyes, sinking into meditation by habit. Or trying to. There’d been appreciation in that look of Duo’s, but not only the kind reserved for a warrior’s martial moves...Yet the disapproval Wufei should be feeling was a bit belated in kicking in.

He was on a mission, and Duo had no business looking at him like that anyway. Wufei had exceedingly high standards in that department, and Maxwell failed to qualify on a lot of them. But then why had Wufei let him watch... ?

Wufei felt a frown work its way through the muscles of his face which he was trying to relax. Why had he let Duo watch? He’d not questioned it during the Wushu. Wufei was an intensely private person and he didn’t like people ogling him while he practiced or meditated. The Dragon’s Wushu was something particularly intimate. He always isolated himself when he practiced it. He wouldn’t consider showing it to any of his lovers, much less a somewhat-friend-onetime-ally he’d not seen in five years. Heero had seen it, and Quatre, and- why hadn’t he stopped when Duo had shown up with his coffee? Duo would have respected his wishes. The smuggler might be a willful adrenaline junky at the best of times, but there’d been something there, a warrior’s understanding. If Wufei had stopped and given him a pointed look, Duo would have immediately gone back inside.

Which was why Wufei hadn’t stopped...

And he couldn’t deny that he had rather liked having those blue eyes on him as he moved, watching the pure, graceful forms and the naked blade.

He couldn’t deny that he’d liked that last look, either; admiration for Wufei’s strength mixed with a hint of a more basic kind of interest. The memory of the brief flicker of pleasure Wufei had felt when he’d caught that look troubled his mind like a rock skipping across the still surface of a pond. It was going to run roughshod over his attempts at meditation until he accepted it. Yes, he’d enjoyed the way Duo had been staring at him. He wasn’t often looked at like that, as a warrior or as a man. Warriors were, to say the least, out of fashion these days, and it couldn’t be easy to admire his body, which was very visibly a weapon, every burnt inch of it.
Once accepted, the feeling became easier to dismiss. Duo was an ally, a friend and an informant helping Wufei with his mission. Three good reasons not to go there. Wufei had been through this before with Heero. With Trowa too, for that matter. Wufei walked a warrior's path which not many people could aspire to. It was tempting to reach out to the few other men who could stand with him. But that was all it was; a temptation. He was too disciplined to even consider giving in to it. He kept everything carefully separate and under control. He lived alone, he had sex with a few well-chosen partners, he treated Heero and Trowa like the brothers they were, and he existed for Justice.

Duo would know the score, which was why he'd interrupted his contemplation and ran off like his braid was on fire. He'd back off just as quickly as Wufei from a potential complication, one that Duo wouldn't want either; the smuggler was too smart for that. It looked like they were both on the same wavelength. Wufei just hoped there would be no awkwardness-

A towel landed square on his head, answering that concern quite adequately. He snatched it off to glower at the familiar smirk. Yes, this was best. Back to normal.

"Maxwell-"

His search for a suitably dire insult, and Duo's look of anticipation of same, were interrupted by a loud knocking at the front door.

"Huh, the courier's early," Duo commented, trotting away to get it.

Wufei used the towel so generously provided, then stood up to fetch his scabbard.

"Yeah? What's up?"

His sword stopped at the lip of its sheath, then whispered as it sliced the air to lie ready by his side. Duo had spoken loudly, loud enough to be heard from the courtyard. He shouldn't be asking Monique's courier that question. Wufei made his way as silently as possible towards the open door.

"You Maxwell?"

"Yeah, me Maxwell. Who you?"

Wufei took in the room with a glance. A very big man was talking to Duo near the door. He was dressed in thick protective clothes, but Wufei also spotted the bright red band tied around his arm.

Shit.

When Reba Hamilton-Grey had reacted to the sight of a gun by ordering someone to fetch a Red Band, Wufei had gotten a fairly good idea of what a Red Band was. Figures of authority, inasmuch as anarchists had any. He'd met a couple of Makhno's Red Bands since that day in Zapata. One of them had been in charge of stopping the turbine when Kolia had wanted to repair the vent in Center Street. The next day, a woman with the same piece of red cloth tied around her upper arm had shown up to thank Duo for Wufei's assistance with the vent. She'd mentioned with a hopeful look several other repairs in the sector that required a couple of good mechanics. Both Red Bands had been friendly; they were local to the sector and knew everybody by sight.

But from Duo's behavior, this Red Band wasn't a citizen of Makhno and his presence was unexpected. Duo looked relaxed, but his hands rested loosely at his sides, ready to react. This might be the next of Mako's attempts to uncover Wufei's identity...

"Name's Cadma. From Lao," the Red Band grunted in response to Duo's query.
"And you're a man of few words. What exactly can I help you with?"

The Red Band scratched his chin pensively, as if this was a rather complicated question. He was in his mid-twenties with long thick black hair melding into a beard. The radiation apron and bulky protective gear indicated he should be at the far end of the colony, working on its core, instead of knocking on Duo's door.

Wufei forced himself to relax a bit. The guy was alone and apparently not too bright. Surely Freeport could have sent a better spearhead to a lynch mob if Mako had spilled the beans.

"Gotta message. From Elder Braun."

Duo's head came up swiftly. He stared at the message tube Cadma was holding out to him.

"Take it. Gotta go work," Cadma muttered, a deep rumble low in his big chest.

"Thanks," Duo chirped, recovering in an instant. "Wanna cup of coffee? No, you're obviously too busy," he added a bit weakly, watching Cadma's back disappear down the hallway at a lumbering pace. "Have a safe day!"

There might have been a faint grunt in response.

Duo closed the door by leaning against it and letting his weight do the work. He was staring at the message tube, checking the electronic seal.

"Balls, what now?" he muttered, twisting it open and shaking out a piece of paper.

Wufei was at his side in a second, reading over his shoulder. That close, he could hear the faint intake of Duo's breath.

The note was scribbled in a leaky pen. '201-3-3rd Av, Kropotkin. Amber!'

"Amber?" Wufei asked tightly, skin prickling. Duo had told him before they'd even docked in Freeport that flashing amber lights were a serious warning. Like a hull-breach or a radiation leak, that kind of 'serious'. The metal of Duo's building and the sector walls around them seemed suddenly pitifully thin in Wufei's mind when stacked against the crushing vacuum of space.

Duo crumpled the piece of paper and stuffed it into his pocket. "Get dressed," he ordered shortly.

"What were those numbers? An address?" Wufei asked, fumbling through his neat pile of folded clothes for something warm. Sweat was drying on his chest, under his arms and at his waistband, chilling him, but no time to shower.

"Yes. In Kro. Come on."

"Are we going there?"

"Yes!" Duo snapped, making shooing gestures to rush him along.
"Why? What does this-

"Because if Braun sent me this, it means I gotta be at this address yesterday. Now hurry! Or I drag you through the streets like you are now."

Wufei, in his underwear, his leather pants in one hand, took half a second to throw a scowl at his Handler before getting dressed as fast as he could.

While Wufei threw on his jacket and strapped on his sword, Duo scribbled a note directing Monique's runner to drop the broken mecha piece off at Gilla's. Then they headed towards the Voltairine airlock almost at a run, which turned out to be rather pointless as they had to wait a quarter of an hour for the train.

When factory and shipyard shifts were turning over, the trains were packed to capacity. But at this hour both carriages were all but empty. Wufei and Duo settled all the way in the back, insuring empty seats all around them as a matter of course.

"Is this summons anything to do with Mako?" Wufei asked quietly.

"No. Well, maybe. Maybe Braun wants to meet me to warn me about somethin'. But then he'd have dropped by, or asked me to stop by his office. Dunno why we'd meet him in Kro if it was that." Duo fished a liquorice stick out of his pocket, twirled it around his fingers agilely and then flicked it into his mouth.

"I've been worried about a Red Band showing up with Mako behind him for several days now," Wufei admitted in a low voice, finding the right pitch to be heard over the train's racket without being indiscreet. This was the first time in four days he'd actually voiced one of his concerns; they'd fallen back into wartime patterns where they'd not talk over the worst that could happen, just quietly prepare for it, each on their own.

"I wasn't worried about Mako showing up with a Reddie. I was more worried about him showing up with forty bruisers and lead pipes," Duo admitted in a mutter. Wufei read it on his lips more than he heard it.

"It'd be worse if it were someone in authority, though. Right? Then we'd have the whole colony against us," Wufei reasoned.

"Not really. Some guy picking up a piece of red cloth in a lottery don't have the authority to move the whole colony against you, not without proof. And if Mako had any kinda proof, then we'd have had a mob at our door with a nice, shiny rope," Duo mumbled distractedly around his liquorice stick, staring out the much-scratched plastic window.

The train taking them to Kropotkin thundered over the tracks. Cla-clack, cla-clack, cla-clack-

"What did you say?"

"Rope. Sorry, Chang, we don't have courts of appeal here-"

"No, I meant, how did you say Red Bands are chosen?"
"Lottery. A random draw twice a year."

"That's what I thought you said the first time, too. You're joking, of course."

"Nope."

Wufei stared at Duo, who gave him a fairly serious look in return, well, as serious as he usually got.

"I can't believe even a bunch of- of-"

"Anarchists."

"-of anarchists like you would choose your supervisors randomly!"

Duo shrugged casually. "That's how it works. If you've lived in Freeport for more than two years and you're over eighteen, you're in the draw. They select twenty to forty Red Bands depending on sector size. Ain't been chosen yet, and I hope my luck holds out. You get to do all that rationing and organizing and shit, and you still have to do your own job, s'insane amount of work."

"A random draw every six months."

"Yup."

"This works?!!"

There was only a pair of lovers necking at the other end of the near-empty train wagon and two teenage girls talking quietly five rows away. The couple ignored Wufei's loud exclamation. The girls stared at him, then went back to talking together and giggling in a way he found rather discomforting.

"But these people are in charge," he hissed at Duo, keeping his voice at a reasonable level this time.

"You just looooove that word, don'tcha."

"That's insane! Why can't you have elections to decide who'd do the better job?"

Duo chuckled. Wufei had the distinct impression the smuggler was enjoying his confusion and found it an acceptable distraction from worrying about the urgent summons. "An election? Do we look that organized? Besides, around here, 'politician' is a dirty word. It just means the kind of rat who likes to boss people around, and spends all his time and energy trying to get re-elected so he can do it again."

"Isn't this-" Wufei's lips curled, he refused to call it a 'system', "-isn't this lunacy open to abuse? If you select just anybody, and they know they don't have to be accountable to an electorate."

"Oh, everybody plays the system a bit, but remember the position is only yours for six months." Duo smiled predatorily. "After that, someone else will get picked. And that guy might be somebody you screwed over if you played it too fast and loose. Makes you careful."

"But what about- for fuck's sake, Maxwell! This place is rife with- with desperate psychopaths and- and thugs, pirates-"

"Smugglers!" Duo put in proudly.

"-and god know what! You don't mind when one of them gets put into power for six months?"

Wufei had assumed the Red Bands were chosen through a dependable election process, but rational and Freeport just didn't mix.
"Well, there's thirty nine others to balance out any real lunatic element, as well as help each other out," Duo answered. His fingers were beating a nervous tattoo on the edge of the seat and his eyes twitched every time they crossed a junction and the lights in the wagon flickered. "It's not just the loonies you gotta worry about, we also got people who can't read and write, and those who are a bit low on brains. They're citizens too, and some of them are my friends, but I wouldn't trust them with an electric toothbrush, much less an air filter turbine. They have their strengths. They leave rationing, repairs and organizing to the other Reddies, and they take care of the people, they make sure everybody's happy and that there's no growing friction. Break up fights and stuff. Everybody's got something Freeport can use. Even the psychos. And you know what?"

A disrespectful hand slapped Wufei on the thigh. Wufei tensed, he was still a bit spooked by had happened between them earlier- but Duo's smile was nothing but teasing. Wufei scalded the space-jockey with a look that could have melted Gundanium, but Duo only smirked.

"Psychos, pirates, smugglers, terrorists...and it's still better than the politicians we used to have on L2," Duo declared. "You still have them out there. You guys may have elected Relena to power - and I pray to God Almighty she's matured a bit since she wandered around after Heero, getting herself kidnapped and all-"

"She has," Wufei grunted.

"Good, good. But the thing is, the middle management and civil service, they're still the same. They serve her, they served OZ, they served the Alliance and the Federation and the Colonies before them. You couldn't even prosecute the ones who had their hand in crimes against humanity, like the bastards who let the plagues run rife through L2 fifteen years ago, trying to clear up the riffraff. No, no, blanket pardon! Thank you, Ms Peacecraft."

"That pardon allowed the five of us to escape-"

"I'd have gladly gone to jail with the fucks."

Duo's voice had been a snarl, sudden and vicious. Wufei leaned back, trying to gauge how serious those words had been, though his gut was telling him Duo had meant every one of them and more. Duo turned away to stare out the window and the ugly light in his eyes dimmed. He spat out a piece of the stick he'd accidentally bitten through. The lazy grin came back a few seconds later.

It had only lasted a moment, but Wufei had caught sight of a bitter hatred that looked to be as old and strong as Duo himself. What shocked Wufei wasn't the emotion. He knew how he'd feel in Duo's place. What confounded him was the way it melded into the cheerful blue eyes and mocking grin once more, without a fuss. It wasn't banished. It wasn't pushed down and tightly controlled, like Wufei's past was. It burned softly in Duo's pupils, it sharpened his grin. If Duo met one of those men and he thought he could get away with it, he'd kill the rat without any regret or remorse. But until that happened, he wasn't going to dwell on it. Wufei would have been consumed by it years ago...

"Well, no matter. I guess we all got to move on," Duo drawled, probably in deference to the fact he was talking to a Preventer, an agent of law and order who would have something to say about vigilantism and cold-blooded revenge. Wufei felt a flicker of relief. If one of those men suddenly disappeared while Duo was on the same colony, Wufei didn't want to know any more about it than he already did. He didn't like it when Justice and his duties as a Preventer collided.

"As for how us poor lil' citizens choose who's in charge...each to his own, my friend, each to his own. Me?"

Wufei was still staring at the strange creature by his side, emotions bright, primal, uncontrolled, yet as
strong and effective in his own way as any of Wufei's colleagues...He was paying so much attention to Duo's psychological makeup that he lost sight of what the joker was actually doing, and so he wasn't able to avoid another lightning-fast slap on the thigh. Duo snatched his hand back before Wufei could do anything constructive about it, like twist that disrespectful hand in a strangling thumb-lock until the buffoon apologized.

Duo's grin was much brighter than the train's grimy neon. "You can keep your politicos and their cadre, Chang! I prefer the randomly-chosen psychos!"

Wufei nodded, accepting the challenge. In the ten minutes it took them to get to Kropotkin sector, he'd marshaled a few stinging arguments on political theory and democracy that left Duo grimacing and rubbing the back of his neck in a familiar gesture. Wufei had the advantage of a formal education in both history and politics. He knew the kind of arguments to put forth and how to present them, whereas Duo only had information he'd gleaned from the books he'd read during his quarantine and a mind that was more suited to practical mechanics than philosophical discussions.

Despite the uneven match, Duo put up a good fight. His wit was quick as his stiletto, and he'd obviously thought about this more than his casual endorsement of the system seemed to suggest. The discussion was a nice distraction from the worries and tensions that had ridden them these past days. The argument was just getting interesting - as well as a bit loud, though still friendly - when they arrived at their destination.

Wufei hadn't been in Freeport that long, but it was obvious from the moment they set foot in the sector that there was something very wrong in Kropotkin. There were people in the streets, but they were not going back and forth on shifts, or working on their secondary jobs. They stood muttering in doorways and alleys, in knots of twos and threes. There were no children about, though small eyes peeked at Wufei over window sills, wide and unsure as they caught their elders' tension.

Duo was in his element again. His smile was bright, curious and entirely innocent. He inspired confidence. The sector's inhabitants were worried and angry, and reluctant to share whatever it was with someone not from their home turf, but Duo cajoled and charmed. He greeted people he knew, badgered those he didn't. Before they'd walked more than three blocks towards the address Braun had sent them, they'd figured out what had happened.

There'd been a murder in the sector.
Chapter 13

We know the road to freedom has always been stalked by death.
---Angela Davis

The tension and the anxiety pervading the sector increased the closer Duo and Wufei got to their
destination. It was obvious their summons had something to do with the murder. Wufei followed
Duo in silence; the streets were too crowded to talk freely.

There was a loose ring of people around the door at the address Braun had sent them. Three Red
Bands stood in front of the building.

Wufei expected Duo to walk up to them and identify himself, but his friend strolled on down the
road with barely a glance. Wufei trailed after him, puzzled. Duo picked up the pace as soon as they
reached a dark alley leading away from the street. They circled the block of buildings until they were
one edifice away from the murder scene. There was nobody in the roads on this side, so Wufei
leaned towards his informant.

"What are we doing?"

"We're going round back to get in. More discreet."

"Oh. Why did Braun call you?"

He thought he caught the slightest flicker of blue eyes, though Duo's expression stayed open and, to
all appearances, honest. "Dunno. I suppose there's a reason. Maybe it's Mako who got recycked and
Braun thinks I'm to blame."

In other words, I might know but I won't tell you. Fair enough. Wufei would figure it out soon
enough.

"Why's everybody so upset?"

"Because they have a dead body on their hands." Duo looked a bit surprised at the question.

"From what I've seen, dead bodies aren't exactly in short supply in Freeport. We've produced one of
those already and nobody in Zapata looked quite this disturbed. And they certainly would not have
been this distressed if we'd been the ones to bleed out on the pavement." In fact the spectators in
Zapata had been rather looking forward to it. By contrast, the worry in the streets of Kropotkin had
been almost palpable.

"Ah, but there's a difference. In this case, it's murder."

"What the hell would it have been if Ericson had had his way?"

"Duel. Confrontation. Accidental death, if you want to get cute."

Wufei stared at him, but there was no indication that Duo was joking, not even a little bit.

"Of all the-"
"Murder's different."

It was, in fact, Duo's very seriousness that interrupted Wufei's tirade.

Duo stopped and glanced around carefully, then he put his hands in his pockets and stared straight ahead, face hard. "Look, we're a violent bunch. You've seen enough by now to realize that life is easier to lose than your house keys in Freeport. I got no excuse for that. It's the way we are. Conditions are brutal here, life is too. But at least we're open about it. If you hate a man's guts enough to want to ex him, you call him out on it, knowing and accepting the consequences. That's the way it works. Murder breaks the rules."

"Rules?! What rules-"

"Murder is when somebody finds a dead body somewhere, and there's nobody obviously responsible. Somebody died, and the reason wasn't one that his friends, or even the bystanders, would accept. And that's wrong. I told you that what motivates us desperate creeps is survival. We don't let anybody take that from us. Everybody's got to die, in Freeport we know that better than anyone, but we won't die for no good reason."

The smuggler looked up and pinned Wufei with an all-too-old gaze.

"I deserve to get crucified for some of the stuff I did during the war," Duo said, completely matter-of-fact. "Well when that day comes, I'll go down with a grin on my face, 'cause I'll know exactly how I got there. I'm the only master of my life, and the one who's responsible for it. I won't die as some statistic, I'll die because of what I did, I'll die as me. And I don't know any better way to go. Do you?"

Wufei was silent for a moment. Two sets of instincts, frequently in conflict, were arguing over what Duo was saying. The Preventer was more than appalled. The warrior, however, understood.

"That works for the individual," he finally said. "That worked for us five years ago because of circumstances. But a society-

"-is made up of individuals, and our circumstances have always been a bit desperate here," Duo interrupted with a shark-like grin. "Which is why we don't need some kind of festering, secret war erupting under our noses in the shape of people dropping dead for unknown reasons. Especially in Kropotkin. There are places where things are hazier and bad shit happens. Gang wars and such. It's messy. But Kropotkin is one of our most orderly sectors, and for this to happen here...yeah, that'd get even the Elders worried. Something damn heavy must have gone down, and this is just the ripple on the surface, the first warning sign..."

Duo's eyes had narrowed and wandered over the blind windows, the empty streets. Wufei followed his gaze. What was it that Duo saw? To Wufei, the buildings were metal bars, the sector wall was a prison cell and one of the inmates had just murdered another while all the guards were gone. The chemical and metallic stink in the air seemed to reek of blood. And yet a small part of him was starting to see a thin thread of guiding logic through the chaos.

Anger at his own lapse of judgment fuelled his voice. "Duo, this place is a zoo! And I can't believe you-

A finger was pressed against his lips; he'd barely saw Duo move. The leather of the glove was cold. Wufei, silenced, gaped at Duo, who was now examining the unlit windows staring down at them.

"I'd love to have this debate, but I don't think we should do this now. Or here. Come on, we can
fight about all this later." Duo turned to Wufei with a smirk, his eyes shining roguishly once more. "I got to admit, you're more fun to argue with than Heero is. But now's the time to focus. We got a dead geezer in the next house over, and Braun seems to think I should know about it."

The braided man opened the door to the nearest building and walked in on cat's paws. Wufei followed, surprised and disturbed by his own passion a moment ago. He knew what Freeport was, he'd known before coming here, why was he getting so upset? He needed to focus. Duo was right. It was this bloody place, it was continuously throwing him off-balance...

The hallway they had entered was silent, and Wufei saw Duo's shoulders relax. They were in a five-story building with three numbered doors on each floor. Duo ghosted to the door at the end and glared at it.

"Damn, the yard door's in someone's house. We can't go through there."

Before Wufei could ask a question, Duo turned and walked silently towards the stairs. He climbed up four flights of steps, pausing at the window at the end of each hallway to stare out in the eternal night of Freeport, his face slashed by shining neon streetlights outside.

They reached the last floor and made their stealthy way up a short flight of iron stairs. Duo produced a couple of lockpicks from about his person like a magician pulling a rabbit out of a hat, and had the door to the roof open with two twists of the wrists. He moved out, looking around carefully.

The rows of buildings on each side of the block were not back to back; communal courtyards kept them separated by a few meters. Duo walked silently to the edge of the roof and glanced down. His eyes glinted in the light from the small yard five floors below. He examined the building opposite and the blind eyes of darkened windows around them. Then, with barely a murmur of leather, Duo swung himself up and over the parapet and down the rungs of an emergency ladder which ran down the back of the building, passing by each of the windows, a possible out in case of fire. Wufei followed, trying to mimic Duo's utter silence and cursing inwardly at every scuff of boot against metal. They could hear people talking and moving in the street on the other side of the silent building, echoes rising and bouncing around the sector streets. It made Wufei feel watched as he scuttled down the ladder like a roach fleeing a spotlight.

Duo was waiting for him at the bottom, his eyes on the back door to the building containing the crime scene. He rubbed his nose with a gloved thumb and squared his shoulders. "Let's do this."

The back door was locked, but Duo made short work of it. He cracked the door and peered inside cautiously. Wufei leaned over Duo's bowed head and applied his eye to the crack as well, fingers on the strap of his sword.

This door led to a hallway rather than someone's apartment. Two men were visible through the crack in the door. Wufei could barely make out the first; he was at the front door, blocking it. One of the Red Bands they'd seen earlier. His back was turned to them, he was facing the crowds of curious and concerned citizens outside. Another man was standing at the stairwell halfway down the corridor. He was scowling, his arms crossed and his eyes fixed on the front door.

Duo let the door swing open a bit more and hissed very quietly.

The man started and turned his head. Wufei got a better look at him; a man in his late fifties, his face deeply carved with lines like vertical ravines marking long, mournful cheeks. His cropped hair was grey, nearly white, and it looked like he hadn't shaved today. The bristles were dark grey and black against the pallor of papery skin.
The tension that had wound the thin shoulders tight loosened a bit as he saw Duo. The man made a wait-a-sec gesture and turned towards the front door. Duo silently shut the back entrance, though he left it open just a crack.

That must have been Braun. He hadn't looked as old as Wufei had expected. Then again, becoming an Elder was not dependant on your physical age but the number of years you'd lived in Freeport, the number of people you knew willing to put your name forward and a vote of approval by the other Elders. There were two Elders per sector. They weren't in charge of Freeport, Duo had mischievously hastened to reassure Wufei, but their full-time job was to make sure everything turned over alright. They were too old for the physical labor in the shipyards and factory floors, so they spent their time organizing the shipbuilding contracts, the Red Bands, the commissaries, and keeping an overall view on things. They didn't control Freeport's heading, but they did sort of make sure the colony didn't drive itself into a hole.

Duo had told Wufei about the Elders a couple of weeks back already. He'd obviously expected Wufei to be shocked. Since Wufei's clan had had pretty much the same system, Duo had not gotten the rant on the virtues of democracy that he'd expected, and had seemed rather disappointed at that.

Wufei heard a quiet murmur and then the sound of the front door being closed. Steps came towards them. Duo opened the door after a last glance around the courtyard, dark and echoing like the bottom of an empty aquarium, and then he slipped inside, followed by Wufei.

"Duo." Up close, and despite its unshaven condition, the older man's face was hard and commanding. He was dressed in the utilitarian grey of the factory workers, the only mark of his position of Elder was the authority in his voice and the gesture he made towards the stairs. "Second floor."

"What-"

"You'll see," was the curt answer. Wufei was spared an equally curt glance, hard and borderline hostile, but Braun didn't comment on his presence.

Wufei smelled the blood before he reached the landing. Whatever had happened had been fairly recent. The streets outside were still humming, and Wufei heard the muffled voice of a Red Band asking people to disperse. The silence of the first floor was oppressive by contrast. A murmur threaded its way through the stifling quiet, a gentle, soothing voice.

There was only the slash of light from outside to illuminate the hallway. It seemed Braun didn't want to switch on the light in view of the spectators in the street and the surrounding buildings. Two people were sitting on the first stairs up to the third floor, barely visible in the darkness. Wufei made out a woman's face, whiter than the whitewash that reflected the streetlights from unpainted walls. The man sitting next to her was murmuring, a gentle threnody of compassion. The murmur ended in a gentle question. "Do you want to leave now?"

"No!" the woman said harshly. Wufei heard the hysteria barely leashed in her voice.

Duo glanced at her, then obeyed Braun's nodded instruction to step through the door. He stopped immediately and whistled under his breath. Wufei glanced over his shoulder and took in the sight with a professional glance.

Victim was male, around thirty years of age, lying flat on his back with his head thrown back and his left arm up near his head. The right arm was partly hacked off, hanging by a curdling thread of skin and ruptured muscle. Bone glistened whitely through the blood clots. It was that cut more than the actual deathblow that caught Wufei's attention. The arm had been nearly severed, but even from
where he stood, it was obvious that there were no hack marks. That cut had been made with a single blow from a heavy, long-bladed weapon. Something like a very sharp machete, for example.

Wufei glanced at Braun who'd followed them in and was leaning against the doorjamb as if to block either access or exit, arms crossed over his chest. His eyes were flat and unfriendly when they met Wufei's gaze, but it seemed he wanted something from him, Wufei wasn't sure what.

A whisper of leather brought Wufei's attention back to where the corpse lay. Duo had gathered up his coat to lean over the body without letting the hem drag in the thickening bloodstains. Wufei made a motion to hold his friend back, but what was the point? There were no local law enforcement to cordon off the scene, no authorities to bring in a team of forensics and interrogate the neighbors.

Duo examined the dead man's face and then he glanced up at Wufei. There was none of Braun's hostility in his gaze. It was simply a question, and it did not look like Wufei would be blamed if he turned down the silent request that lay behind it.

As far as Wufei was concerned, the question did not need to be asked. There might not be any police force and forensics team available, but there was at least one Preventer present, and by god he was going to do his job whatever the unusual, not to say surreal, conditions and circumstances. Given the chance, he'd have done it even without that bastard Carver possibly being involved.

Wufei removed his jacket and laid it on a table nearby after carefully examining the surface for anything he might disturb. From the breast pocket he fished out the small flashlight Duo had given them the first day they'd arrived in the colony. "The lights tend to fail in Freeport," Duo had explained in a lazy drawl that implied this was a frequent event that made life interesting. "You never know when you might need it." Truer words...

Leaving the corpse aside for a moment, Wufei examined his surroundings. The room was the width of the building, twenty-one feet by fourteen, Wufei estimated. It wasn't an apartment, the area had been set aside as a craft shop. Waist-high bins of leather, cardboard, thick cloth and sheet plastic lined the wall. An open cupboard revealed paintbrushes, tubes, bottles and boxes. Small tables throughout the room bore works in progress: simple slippers, toys, gaily painted bags and purses.

The victim was near the window. Strangely enough, the chair nearest to him was not pulled out and there was no work on that table. There was in fact no indication of what he'd been doing here.

He had been killed here, though, that much was certain. The quantity and splash pattern of blood confirmed it. Neither were his clothes ruffled or torn as one would expect if he'd been dragged here against his will. No bruise sign of a gag either, and Wufei knew Freeport's overcrowded conditions well enough to know that nobody could drag an ungagged man anywhere without ten citizens knowing about it. So what had the man been doing here, standing near the window...?

Wufei finally approached the victim. Duo stood back and let him have the floor. As they passed each other, Wufei caught Duo's eye and glanced back at their silent companion.

"Braun, this is Agent Chang," Duo said very softly in answer to Wufei's unvoiced question. "Wufei, this is Elder Braun."

Braun grunted. He didn't look happy about any of this. His long cheeks sagged, he looked like a cross, elderly basset hound in the bad light. But he nodded grudging acknowledgement in Wufei's direction. So with Cesar in Zapata, that made at least two people who knew some of Wufei's real purpose in Freeport. And Braun was someone in authority, if one could call it that. Someone who knew enough of the details to call Duo and Wufei in for this murder. Interesting.
Wufei crouched near the corpse, careful to keep his boots out of the rivulets of blood that had snaked their way along near-invisible indentations in the linoleum. Wufei glanced around the corpse, staring at the cheap flooring and flashing his light's beam around. His fingers traced a deep cut near the body, lifting white plastic edges towards his illumination. Recent, he judged, the plastic had not had time to yellow and curl. The cut was precise and near the victim's side.

In Wufei's mind, different scenarios played out. Two men near the window, arguing, the flash of a blade...or else the murderer had burst into the room, catching his victim doing something near the window. A first fierce blow towards the man's arm which he'd have lifted in defense. Unless...

"Duo? Look around for a weapon."

"Sure. Uh, you think he'd have left it here?" Duo kept the query as neutral as possible, visibly unwilling to question Wufei's expertise in front of Braun; a nice show of support in the tense atmosphere.

"The victim's weapon, if he had one," Wufei elaborated. "And anything else you can find."

"Oh, right." Footsteps shuffled behind him, followed by the click of another flashlight turning on.

"Don't disturb the evidence," Wufei added, then scowled down at the corpse. There was no need for such caution in Freeport.

"'Fraid it won't be telling us much either way, mate, but I'll do my best," Duo answered placidly. A glance showed Wufei that Duo was moving carefully, watching where he put his feet. The Preventer turned back towards the victim.

So a fierce blow to the arm which had been lifted in attack or just in defense. The hack of metal against flesh. The victim's cry as the bone split and muscle gave way. A stagger back, a stumble into the nearest table and chair which were knocked out of alignment with the others, a wide smear of blood on the plastic table top.

Once the victim was on the ground...first that blow to the floor. The victim must have rolled away from it as it came at him. Then the killing blows.

Wufei wished he had some latex gloves handy. He hesitated, but what the hell. He was vaccinated against most things, his immune system was still abnormally boosted five years after the war and he had no cuts on his hands. As for his contaminating the crime scene, the idea was laughable. He slipped the torch between his teeth, long practice keeping the beam perfectly steady. His fingers teased apart the cloth of the jacket, shirt and t-shirt from the wound, noting how the threads had been sliced as cleanly as flesh and dragged into the resulting incision.

The murderer had caught the man at a slight oblique. It looked like part of a rib was sectioned. Wufei grumbled to himself, remembering he wouldn't be getting an autopsy report on this one.

The blow had beaten in the ribcage. Pink-white tissue clung to the edges, dragged out when the blade was removed. Lung tissue, probably. It curdled against the victim's bloodied clothes.

The blow at the neck had been next in all likelihood. The killer wouldn't have bothered with a wild blow to the man's torso if he'd managed to score the throat first. The blow was off-center though. The victim must have been thrashing in agony. It had caught half the neck, tendons gleaming grey under Wufei's flashlight. The blood had stopped flowing awhile ago already. It had spurted as far as the wall; the blade had hacked into the carotid. From the angle of the blow, the killer must have gotten hit by some of the flow.
Wufei carefully pushed the victim aside. He had to bludgeon his conscience into submission first. It was shrieking that he was tampering with a crime scene, and waiting in vain for the flash of light from photographers who would never show, coroners and forensics experts who would never have the chance to examine the man's position before moving him.

The weapon had scored the floor through the torso and the neck. The cuts in the cheap wood amalgam beneath the linoleum looked deep.

Wufei stood up and glanced around, then walked up to the cupboard. Braun watched him in silence. Duo had stopped examining the room and was standing near the window at an angle that would keep him from being seen from the street. He was scrutinizing the crowds. Wufei wondered what he was looking for. Seeing if anyone unexpected had shown up to check out the fuss? As an investigator, Wufei knew that the old adage of 'the criminal returns to the scene of his crime' occurred more often than one would expect.

The cupboard yielded a tape measure. He used it to feel out and measure the incline of the cut in the floor, scraping out clotted blood with a piece of cardboard first. From the angle, the killer must have been standing or half crouched, and he'd hammered down with the point of the weapon. It had sunk deeply and sharply into the floor. That put the killer's strength to way above average, and the weapon must have been heavy and broad. The end of the hack mark in the body and the floor did not correspond to a sword or saber. Wufei was not a certified forensics expert, but he knew his blades and this really looked like the work of a machete, however much he tried to keep an open mind about the possible identity of the killer.

A pat-down of the corpse's pockets revealed no papers that Wufei could find, but it did turn up a long hunting knife strapped to the small of the back. There had been no attempt to unsheathe it. The man's clothes weren't even rumpled up around the holster. The murderer had taken the victim by surprise. This had all happened one to three hours ago, Wufei judged by the gathering rigor mortis in the body's joints and muscles and the cold in the room that would have delayed it.

"Find anything?" he threw over his shoulder as he carefully washed his hands in the small sink surrounded by cleaned paint pots and brushes.

"No," said Duo without breaking away from his scrutiny of the street and the opposite building.

Wufei turned, wiping his hands on a rag, and caught Braun looking at him. The Elder was frowning, but his eyes were sharp, curious, and had lost some of their previous hostility.

The Preventer made his way towards the door. Braun looked surprised and none-too-pleased as Wufei strode right up to him. Near the window, Duo turned around and shifted forward.

"Excuse me," Wufei said crisply.

Braun stared at him, then followed the beam of Wufei's flashlight towards the bloody hand-print on the doorjamb just above his head. Braun jerked away, mouth dropping open. He fetched up against the other jamb for a split second until he started and spun around to see if he'd missed other gory testimonies there as well.

Wufei didn't pay much attention to the Elder, he concentrated on the hand-print. He'd been expecting some kind of trace. The killer hadn't gotten any blood on the soles of his shoes, but he had been doused with it, so there would surely be something. He'd been wearing gloves of course. Not that that mattered, since Wufei didn't have a fingerprint kit, or anything other than his eyes and his flashlight.
The victim must have screamed. The killer lost precious seconds dealing the deathblow. After that final cut to the neck, he must have gotten out as quickly as possible. He would have leaped to the doorway, catching himself on the jamb as he halted to check the hallway for witnesses before running towards the stairs. His right hand had come to rest here and smudged his victim's blood on the white paint. Wufei had noticed other traces on the banister as he'd climbed the stairs earlier.

The print was on the right side of the doorway; he'd been carrying the weapon in his left hand. In the circumstances, he'd have put his hand nearly at head height to stabilize himself. The print was very high up on the doorjamb. Wufei used the tape measure to confirm that it was at five eight.

Carver was over six feet tall and left-handed.

Wufei felt the cold prickle of the hunter lift the small hairs on the back of his neck, but he ruthlessly crushed the excitement. He had to stay objective and focused. He turned towards Braun, lifting the flashlight so the beam cut the air between them, illuminating both their faces faintly.

"Did you know the victim?"

Braun blinked, obviously startled at being addressed. "No, I don't. Oh, I do know his name, though, if that's what you mean. Joshua Brindlow."

"Who's the woman outside?"

"Marta Bernstein. His partner."

"Business or-"

"Family."

"Did he live in this building?"

"No, he's not even from this sector."

Then what the hell was he doing here?

Wufei glanced around. "Who does this room belong to?"

"Nobody. It's a communal room for several buildings."

"What are you doing here?"

There was a tense silence and Wufei remembered that he was a Preventer waaaay outside his jurisdiction. Braun's eyebrows had shot up.

"I meant, are you the Elder of this sector?" Wufei elaborated stiffly.

"No, and I know what you meant," Braun answered with an edge of dry smile for Wufei's audacity. "I can assure you, I was not here when this happened. I was in the Compound when this news came down the lines. That's in Lao Tzu sector, nearly an hour from here," he added, interpreting Wufei's blank look. "I...keep an eye out for these sorts of things," Braun added. The brown eyes flickered in Duo's direction. "So I decided to look into it. Heral, the man outside, is one of the Elders for this sector. I fetched him and we came to investigate. We had one of my Red Bands check the man's ID tattoo and we traced him through central records. Found Marta at their home, had her brought here by one of the Red Bands."

And then he'd sent for Duo. Why, Wufei wanted to ask, but he wasn't sure the question would be
answered. Braun's attitude seemed to discourage any further comments. Though the hostility was gone, he was still treating Wufei's presence here as something he'd rather not contemplate. Considering he'd called in a Preventer into something that had Freeport in turmoil, Wufei found that understandable. If the crowds outside learned about any of this, Wufei and Braun might both end up swinging from the same lamppost.

"Which sector does this man come from?"

"Mooncurse."

"That's like five or six sectors away from here, at the edge of the industrial sector and nearer the dockyards," Duo interjected thoughtfully, tapping his chin with his gloved finger. "It's a sector full of freetraders and pirates, hence the name. Any witnesses?"

"No. A woman on the ground floor saw somebody running out the building and down the street, but I couldn't get much of a description out of her. Tall, was what she said first, short brown hair, dressed in a knee-length brown coat. Then she started elaborating wildly and I stopped listening."

That fitted Carver. It also fit a fourth of the male population of Freeport, Wufei added severely, batting down once more the hope that they'd finally found some proof that the man they were chasing wasn't a ghost.

"Nobody else heard Brindlow scream several times and fall to the ground, and then notice a very tall man with a machete and bloody clothes run out of the building?" Wufei asked tightly. "Who lives beneath this room?"

"Nobody, it's a crèche."

"Wonderful," Duo muttered.

"The screams were heard," Braun added. "It's - it was the middle of the night for the dockers here. Everybody was asleep. The two families living on this floor heard a shout, cries and sounds of a struggle and then someone running down the stairs. But by the time they went to investigate..."

"And outside?" Wufei asked, walking back towards the corpse.

"If somebody had seen him, they'd have come forward already."

Great. Carver had disappeared into thin air again. Still, he had been here. Wufei would never be presenting this murder scene to a court, so he could drop the 'presumably' and the 'alleged' and go with his gut instincts. They were telling him he'd found his man, albeit briefly.

He stared down at Joshua Brindlow's tightening features, lips pulled back over teeth, eyes wide and staring. Since Wufei was the coroner here as well as everything else, he passed his hands over the eyes, closing them. Then, remembering the woman in the hall, he did his best to pull the man's features into something a loving partner could carry with her in her memory.

"Does anybody in this building know the victim?" he asked.

"No. Or they're not saying." The last was added very reluctantly. Braun, like Duo, wanted to believe in the crude honesty and openness of Freeport even with the evidence to the contrary under his nose. "That's why we had to look up his tattoo. Nobody's even seen him around before. I checked with Marta. Joshua was a freetrader. A solo operator for the most part. His ship is - was the Jolly."

"The Jolly?" Duo said thoughtfully.
"That's what Marta said. She also said that Joshua was doing something for a friend these past two days. Marta didn't know what."

"Duo, what route did the Jolly run?" Wufei asked quietly as if the answer were a small animal that could be frightened away if he barked the question out.

"If it's the Jolly I'm thinking of, exclusively L4," Duo answered glumly in a 'don't get your hopes up' tone of voice. Braun looked from one to the other curiously. Apparently he knew some particulars of the case, but not the details.

Damn. So this wasn't a Freetrader who could have fingered Carver as a passenger on his ship coming from L2. Wufei stared at the features which were somewhat more peaceful now, as if accepting the trip that lay ahead of him with the serenity that befitted the dead.

Why did he kill you, Joshua?

Marta Bernstein was a small woman in her thirties, about Joshua's height and a few years older. Her face was colorless in the dark hallway. Heral, the sector's Elder, looked up as Wufei and Duo approached.

This time it was Wufei who stood back and let Duo operate. Duo didn't insult the woman's grief with pity, his voice stayed firm and matter-of-fact, but there was genuine sorrow in his eyes as he talked.

Marta listened to his questions in silence. She wasn't crying. Her wide eyes were dull and flat, and her attention wandered to the door of the bloodied room at one point while Duo was talking. Wufei wondered if she'd seen the body yet. Duo brought her attention back to him gently.

Unfortunately she didn't know much. Or, the Preventer's paranoia added, she wasn't talking. Wufei wanted to ask her where she'd been a few hours ago, what she knew of Joshua's movements these past two days, and if she was acquainted with a big tall son of a bitch who carried a machete around. Duo's questions and gentle insistence seemed to take ages and didn't get them anywhere, but Wufei reined in his impatience. This was not a witness interrogation. Freeport citizens had a mentality that still escaped Wufei for the most part, but they didn't respond well to threats and orders, he knew that much. He leaned back against the wall to wait, and caught Braun giving him that speculative look again.

"I'm sorry." Marta's face was loosing the stiffness of shock and starting to crumple. "I just don't know- I'm not- he didn't say, he said it was for a friend, and he was looking into something. But Josh is- he's not a rat-catcher or- or anything!" She seemed distressed that Duo might think so. "He just-... a friend- a friend asked him-"

"Shhh, s'okay, Marta." Duo patted her shoulder as she hunched over. Heral drew her into his arms for a hug. Duo watched her for a minute in silence, his hand still on her shoulder, then he glanced up at Braun.

"We have a Red Band outside who can take her home, or to a friend's house," said the latter. "Marta?"

She was shuddering now, eyes narrowed as if she didn't want to look ahead and see what was
waiting for her there. Duo squeezed her upper arm but didn't attempt to say anything. Wufei, inured by his own widowhood, his losses and too many interviews with grieving parents and spouses, felt nothing but fatalistic. The future was there, waiting for her, and there was nothing he or anyone could do about it. Hopefully she had some friends to stay with and help ease her into it. Ultimately, she would face it alone.

Duo was silent as he led Wufei back to the courtyard behind the building. They'd parted with nothing more than a wave from Braun who bore the expression of a man gearing himself up for some serious organizing.

The silence between them was leaden and heavy. Though Wufei's head was telling him there was nothing he could have done to save Brindlow's life, his soul still seethed with feelings of undirected guilt and he thought Duo felt the same.

"Braun knows. About me," Wufei murmured finally, knowing that shroud of silence had to be broken sooner or later.

"Yeah." Wufei could barely hear Duo's soft voice above him as they started to climb the ladder. He trod extra lightly on the rungs to avoid covering the near-inaudible words. "When Tro asked me the first time to get Heero in...there's no rules here, but it's still a good idea to get an Elder on your side when you're trying something like this, yanno? It'll stop me from getting spaced if ever this stuff gets out. I'll probably get clobbered, mind you, but at least I won't get recycked."

"You mean," Wufei paused to haul himself over the parapet. "You mean Braun's known about this, about Heero, from the start?"

"Yeah, him and another Elder. It's Braun who checked for me that Carver wasn't hiding out in quarantine. Like all Elders, he's got unrestricted access to IDs and the computer system."

Wufei's gaze went from the building they'd left behind to Duo's features as he measured the import of that. "Why?" he asked bluntly. "Why does he help you? Why does he let you do this?"

Duo rubbed his nose with the back of a gloved finger. "Braun's got a sister. She's sixty years old and a real shrew, but I'm pretty damn sure he doesn't want Carver dating her anyway."

Wufei rolled his eyes in exaggerated annoyance, though inwardly he was unaccountably thankful for the reappearance of the cheeky grin that had been momentarily dampened by Marta's grief. Duo was no stranger to dead bodies, but Marta's pain had affected him where Joshua's bloodied corpse had not. Unlike a cop, he put up no barriers against that sort of thing. But he was already casting off the sorrow and the gloom, and moving on.

"I take it we both think Carver's shown up at last," Duo continued, eyeing Wufei for confirmation. When Wufei nodded, Duo rubbed the back of his neck in the familiar gesture. "That's weird, though. This guy's been living in Freeport for years now as far as we can tell. I don't think he's ever cut anybody up on his home turf before. 'Don't shit in the kitchen' is kind of a motto for the criminal characters in the colony."

"Would you know it if somebody had been murdered this way before?" Wufei inquired, scrutinizing Duo's face.

Was that the slightest flicker of blue eyes away from his? The barest hesitation? "Oy, sure. Rumors fly about this place faster than fire."

"I see," Wufei said, unconvincing. Then he rubbed the bridge of his nose, concentrating on the matter
at hand. "In my line of work, criminals often reveal themselves when an investigation puts them at bay."

"Ye-ah," Duo drawled. "And you really think our poking around qualifies? We barely got started."

"It's too big a coincidence. I can't believe my presence here and Brindlow's murder are completely unconnected. Though I fail to see how."

Duo didn't answer. He was staring thoughtfully at the building opposite the courtyard.

"I think she knows something..."

"Marta? About the murder?" Wufei asked sharply.

"No...I think she knows something about what Josh was doing here. No details, but..."

"Why wouldn't she tell you?" Wufei's paranoia was getting into full gear. Four times out of five, the spouse was in on the murder...

"Because it's a small detail she doesn't see as immediately relevant to his death. Or because she doesn't know me from Adam. Or because...because she trusts the 'friend' who sent Josh here a hell of a lot more than she trusts me. Any of those reasons, or all of the above. I'm not sure she's actually thinking at this point, just reacting. If I could get her to trust me...but I don't see how that'll happen. Maybe I'll ask her later, but I think I'll have more luck getting someone from my network to watch her. See who she talks to. That might-"

The soft musings were interrupted by a metallic noise from a nearby building. The sound of a roof door creaking open and then shutting again, followed by footsteps against rough concrete.

Wufei and Duo had instantly crouched low at the first scrape of metal on concrete. Their rooftop was higher than the others around it by an extra floor and surrounded by a concrete balustrade. As long as they kept their heads down, they could not be seen.

Wufei looked pointedly at the door down from the roof, and Duo turned slowly, walking towards it as noiselessly as a cat, keeping low. But he kept glancing over his shoulder towards where the noise had come from, curiosity plain on his face. Wufei wasn't surprised when Duo stopped his prudent exit halfway to the door and turned around, heading towards the parapet instead. Wufei resisted the urge to grab Duo by the back of his coat and haul him away by force. It was a needless risk, but they should be safe as long as they kept their heads down and were discreet. Might as well indulge the famous Maxwell curiosity.

Duo glanced over the parapet. The way he tensed indicated that what he'd seen was unexpected and very interesting. Wufei crept nearer, trying to move as quietly as his friend, and took a look as well.

A man was kneeling at the edge of the roof of the neighboring building, staring through the bars of a metal railing. He was looking straight at the second floor window on the other side of the courtyard; the window into the room of the murder scene.

The man was small, and the way he crouched in the shadows hid many details. Wufei thought he was dressed in a rough, dark-blue woolen coat. His hair was lanky and graying, falling in threads over thinning spots and the collar.

As Wufei and Duo watched in silence, the man lifted a black object to his face. A pair of night-sight binoculars, Wufei realized, familiar with the shape. From the angle he was holding them, he was looking at the second floor, at the window of the long room that contained the body. The building
the stranger had chosen as his vantage point had only three floors; the angle wasn't too sharp, he had a pretty good view of the entire room. Wufei was suddenly very glad the man hadn't been watching ten minutes ago while they were investigating the crime scene.

Duo and Wufei exchanged a meaningful glance. This seemed like a lot of effort for just a curious bystander.

As they watched, the man glanced from the view in the binoculars to the nearby emergency ladder, visibly hesitating. The ladder lead down to another courtyard. He would be one scramble over a low fence away from the murder site.

Somebody moved in the window on the second floor. The binoculars were back in place in a flash. There was a window to the hallway as well as into the room. Wufei wondered if Marta was visible through that window, if she was still there. He felt a flicker of anger that those grubby, snooping binoculars might be scrutinizing her in her grief.

Neither Wufei nor Duo made the slightest noise, yet the man suddenly jerked away the binoculars and glanced over his shoulder, hunching down further into the shadows. He had the instincts of a rat, thought Wufei, eyes narrowed as he tried to get a look at the face. Something was setting his own instincts stirring.

Duo had ducked behind the parapet, he was tugging urgently at Wufei's sleeve, but the Preventer barely noticed. He leaned forward, eyes scouring the darkness, trying to see the man better.

The man started like frightened vermin when he spotted Wufei in the faint light from the sector ceiling. The movement gave Wufei a good view of his face.

They stared at each other for a tense second. The man looked confused, he wouldn't know who Wufei was or what he was doing there...but those rodent-like instincts must have told him that Wufei was no curious bystander either. With a flick of the blue coat and a scurry across concrete, the man darted towards the door down from the rooftop.

Wufei shot to his feet, hesitated for a split second with one hand on the parapet. He might sprain an ankle jumping to the other roof, two floors down - he was the faster runner anyway.

"Wu?!"

Duo's startled exclamation was abruptly cut by the roof door swinging shut behind the Preventer. Wufei leapt from the iron stairs and raced towards the next flight at full speed.

This might have something to do with Carver or nothing at all. It didn't matter, Wufei only had one certainty. This particular bastard was not going to get away from the law again!
Chapter 14

God in his wisdom took you by the hand
God in his wisdom make you understand
In this colony...
---Joy Division, 'Colony'

Wufei's footsteps rang like thunder in the hall and stairwell. Doors opened behind him. Someone grumbled a question up ahead. Faint, hurried steps followed his. He ran on regardless, his mind fully on the chase. 'Ferret', or whatever his real name was, would not escape this time. Twenty one dead. Twenty one dead and they were still tallying the body count from the riots when Wufei had left. He was going to pin the hide of that motherless bastard to the wall if it was the last thing he did!

The front door crashed open so hard it bounced back and slammed shut right behind him, but Wufei was already through, his feet sliding to a halt on the rough metal of the street as he looked around wildly for his target. There! At the mouth of an alleyway- crossbow!

He was used to people pointing guns at him, not anachronistic medieval weapons, so he'd taken a second to recognize the unfamiliar shape of a small crossbow barely ten inches wide aimed at his chest. But the warrior's instincts had sensed the danger in Ferret's sudden turnaround. Wufei was already half-way across the street and plunging towards the cover of a doorway not too far from his prey. The crossbow only had one shot, and they took a few seconds to reload. If Wufei got close enough before that happened-

The weapon was quivering. The rat-like face was creased with fear and confusion. He didn't know Wufei, he wouldn't have a clue why this stranger was after him. But Ferret fired anyway. In his kind, fear always overpowered doubt.

Wufei pressed himself back into the shelter of the doorway and the bolt whistled past. Wasn't Duo right behind him- No, Shinigami wouldn't get pinned by a small shit like Ferret. Never.

Ferret dropped the crossbow with a frightened grunt and took off down the alley like a rat running from a terrier.

Wufei glanced back - just to be sure - and Duo slammed into the wall next to him, red in the face and panting like a hound.

"What the- fuck - are you -"

"Agitator! On X953! Murdered-

"Shhh!" Duo's braid went flying as he looked around in alarm. When it was clear nobody had followed them out of the building, he turned quickly back to Wufei. "What's he doing casing out a crime scene?"

"Don't know-"

Duo's eyes narrowed to metal-blue slits. "Let's ask him."

They broke into a run side by side into the alley down which Ferret had scampered. Wufei rued every precious second lost getting Duo up to speed. The rat they were chasing had all the instincts of
his kind when it came to dodging the heat. He'd slipped the Preventers' nets time and again on L2 and on L3 before that. Wufei lengthened his stride.

Duo stopped, head cocked for the sound of footsteps, but Wufei kept pounding on. They had to make up for lost time!

"Duo! You take this side, I'll take the other!"

"No! It's too- wait! Chang!"

Wufei had already plunged down a narrow alley and out onto a small road between low buildings. He heard Duo swear behind him, the words quickly covered by the metallic tattoo of the smuggler's black boots hitting the street a block away, heading in the opposite direction.

An atmosphere filter unit huffed warm, stinky air at Wufei as he passed, blowing his hair out of his face. A few strands stayed snared by sweat against his skin. Wufei spun in a circle, then headed in the general direction of the airlock. Ferret would want to get out. The Preventer let his instincts and the pounding rhythm of the chase lead him onwards in a rough search pattern.

The road clanged beneath his feet and he paused, instincts suddenly prickling. He was on a walkway over an empty space, a canal cut deep into the sector's floor. Maintenance access for sewage and other utilities.

There! He should have known he'd find the rat down some kind of hole. Ferret was trying to scrunch into the shadows beneath another walkway two blocks away. He was crouched, obviously out of breath. Even across that distance, Wufei saw the little eyes widen in fear as they met his. Ferret staggered off down the canal which plunged into a tunnel sixty feet further on.

Wufei didn't hesitate. He vaulted over the bridge's rails-

"Wu-?!"

- and landed in a neat crouch on the hard metal of the canal, fifteen feet below. He was up and running instantly. Now he had the little bastard!

Duo's wild and profane cursing bounced from one side of the canal and back again. Wufei glanced over his shoulder in time to see a dark figure make the same drop from a more distant walkway, the black coat flaring. Duo had come in from the other side, he'd lost ground to Ferret and Wufei, but he should be able to keep up.

In the distance, Ferret ducked through a large hatch in the side of the tunnel. Wufei accelerated and burst through only a few seconds behind him.

He was in the hull separating upper and lower level, like a mouse scurrying between the floorboards. He was running down a maintenance access to the systems that sustained life support in the sector above. The corridor was narrow, dimly-lit and rife with pipes; Wufei had to slow down. Good thing he wasn't one of those big, bulky types that looked so good on the Preventer recruitment posters.

Ferret was even smaller than Wufei and probably as agile as his code name implied, but there were no rat-holes to dodge into down here. The dimly lit corridor ran straight as an arrow, and there was nowhere to hide. Wufei just needed to stay close enough to Ferret to be able to hear him if the bastard found a crossroad and took another direction.

The narrow access tunnel opened into a circular room with machines and huge pipes along the walls. The smell of ozone, burnt plastic and machine oil pricked Wufei's nose. Off to one side, four men in
dirty blue overalls with tools in their hands were cluttered around a leaking pipe and pressure gauge. They weren't working though, they were all staring in amazement down one of three corridors leading away from the room. It was as good as a road sign. Wufei passed them at a dead run and plunged down the tunnel they'd been gaping at.

Someone shouted behind him. He ignored it. He could hear Ferret's footsteps up ahead almost as loud as his own. He was gaining ground.

Then another shout, louder this time. Damn! Some of the workers were following him. Wufei was probably not supposed to be in here. This must be a restricted area. He accelerated. Catch Ferret in the flat stretch first; deal with the rest of the complications afterwards, when he had his hands on the bastard, preferably unconscious.

Another maintenance room -

-and a man coming at him, swinging a pipe.

Wufei hurtled towards him, unable to stop. He barely dodged in time. The metal hissed an inch above his head. He rolled, coming to his feet in a crouch with his back to the wall.

It wasn't Ferret! Hell! Wufei looked around wildly. This room also had three other exits, and no signs of his quarry.

Wufei took in a deep breath to shout out 'which way did he go' - his Blade's collar tightened against the inhale, squeezing his throat like a warning. Damn it! He couldn't ask! He was going to lose the murderer!

And that wasn't his only problem.

There were two men blocking him in. The one who'd taken a swing at him with the pipe was moving towards him; average height, thick waist and arms under a stained one-piece coverall. His head was shaved with a smear of grease across the stubble above the ear. Hard eyes moved from Wufei's sword to his face, gauging how dangerous the cornered man was. The second person was a few feet further away next to an acetylene torch. He was dressed in the same one-piece coverall, a protective face-plate shoved up onto his forehead. He looked puzzled, but he'd picked up a wrench with the air of someone who was willing to join in now and ask questions later.

The first man took a step towards Wufei and the metal pipe swung up again, but he stayed the gesture as a thunder of footsteps announced the arrival of the four workers from the previous maintenance room. Oh great, just to make things worse.

"He's here!"

"Both?"

"Nope, just the guy with the sword."

"Hey, Abe, whatcha got here?" This was tossed towards the man with the wrench.

"Dunno," answered Abe. "Do you know who this guy is? And the other one who ran by, with a face like a weasel?"

"No, just saw them shoot through Junction Eleven like the entire OZ armada was after them. Looked like this one was chasing the little guy. Hell, he's a Hound!"
Every eye fastened on Wufei's collar.

"Damn. Does anybody know- hey, hold up!"

The pipe-wielder ignored the order, he'd lifted the pipe again and aimed for Wufei's head. The Preventer slipped under the crude swing but didn't retaliate. He wasn't sure what was going on here, but these people might just be innocent bystanders, if such a thing existed in this colony.

"Hey, stop, man! What's going on?! Abe? What'd this guy do to you two?"

"Um, nothing." Abe didn't look so sure of himself now. The wrench twisted a bit guiltily in his thick fingers.

"So what the hell's going down here, then?" One of the new arrivals hooked a hand beneath the pipe-wielder's arm and hauled him back. "Cool your jets. He's not going anywhere, not with the six of us here. What'd he do?"

Wufei, at bay, watched the interaction without understanding it. The other four men ringed him in, but they made no move towards him. They didn't look particularly afraid of his sword; most of them had taken the time to grab some blunt instrument or other. Hard eyes pinned him to the wall, scrutinized his face, weighed his appearance and his presence here, but nobody attacked him...

...From the darkness, the stink, down the rivulets of sweat on his back, the answer to a question he'd barely formulated started to prickle.

This was Freeport.

He'd assumed these men had followed him to kick him out of a restricted area. But there probably was no such thing on this lawless colony. No, these men had shown up because they'd seen one man chasing another in their sector and that automatically involved them. They were here to stop a fight, or at least make sure it didn't get out of hand.

He'd thrown the question at Duo: What's to stop people from stealing and murdering everybody? The answer: everybody else...

The smuggler's words had been an insult to Wufei's values. He'd thought the place was chaos, gangs held in check by a delicate balance of power. But these men weren't part of a gang. They did not know Wufei and Ferret, and they had no reason to involve themselves in what could turn out to be a dangerous fight. Yet they'd armed themselves and followed anyway. That man was holding back the pipe-wielder because he wanted a damn good reason before he let someone bash in Wufei's head in his presence. They'd have kept Wufei and Ferret apart for the same reason if the Preventer had managed to catch his target. Of course once a good reason was provided, they'd stand back and watch; no need to waste good entertainment, Freeport style. But it wouldn't be hidden, it wouldn't be without a valid reason. It might be a small dust-up or a fight to the death, but it wouldn't be murder.

In the rest of civilization, good citizens avoided potential trouble, or called the cops and hurried away. Here, the citizens were the cops. And judge, jury and executioner too, when it was called for.

This sudden understanding illuminated a lot about Freeport; some things good, some things he didn't approve of. But unfortunately it didn't help Wufei in the present circumstances. These men wanted an explanation and because of his damned collar, Wufei couldn't give them one, creative or otherwise.

Wufei's attacker scowled at the intervention, but his eyes flickered over the assembly. He lived here, he knew the customs and that he needed a justification. He shook off the restraining hand and
gestured at the Preventer with his pipe.

"He's trouble, Steve! The guy he was chasin' is wanted on the outside. This fucker wants to collect bounty on his head."

Wufei took a second, much closer look at the pipe-wielder, etching the man's features into his policeman's memory. Ferret surely had not had the time to make up a lie and pass it on, not with Wufei right on his heels. Why was this man covering a criminal's tracks of his own volition?

Unfortunately the word 'bounty' had been loaded. The mood turned ugly. Steve, the worker who'd stopped Wufei's attacker, frowned and took a step back. The others pressed closer.

"A bounty dog? A rat-catcher I could live with, but not a fucking sellout."

"Were you gonna ex the guy and get your cash from the pigs outside, motherfucker?"

Wufei fought down the instinct to draw his sword against the gathering threat. These men were not criminals in his eyes, not now; they were only being manipulated. He wasn't in his right to hurt them. But he couldn't explain himself either!

"That's not pretty, dude." One of the late arrivals leaned over a toolbox and picked up a hammer.
"We don't like shit like that in our sector. Maybe you need a lil' lesson. Make an example, like, in case others-"

"I'd put that down if I were you."

The quiet words wrapped themselves around the circular metal walls of the maintenance room, sparking small echoes from the bulky machines. Duo had materialized out of the darkness of the corridor behind them and spoken right into the brute's ear.

"Good call," Shinigami murmured as the worker leaped back with a shocked yell, dropping the make-shift weapon. Duo moved smoothly, placing himself unhurriedly between Wufei and the angry men. Hands in his coat pockets, he met them stare for stare.

"Sorry I'm late for the dance; wasn't sure which corridor to take. The echoes in this place, yanno? Now, someone got a problem with my man here?"

There was a purr of menace behind the easy drawl. Several of the men flinched away from the dangerous gaze directed at them. Weapons dipped into less aggressive angles as they were reminded that a Blade was an extension of his Handler, and that any beef they had with Wufei should have been taken up with Duo, not sorted out on the spot. The feeling of incipient violence abated. Duo seemed to be winning a complex argument with the strength of his fearless stance alone. It's more than knowledge, it's attitude, Wufei remembered Duo saying back in Scythe. You gotta have it or we won't make it...

But they weren't home and dry yet, not by a long run. Now they had to explain their presence here, and Duo, with his reluctance to lie, was going to be hard put to do so. If he didn't make it convincing, then the pair of them would be facing six beefy mechanics armed with blunt weapons in a tight space. Wufei relaxed and shifted to get his sword into a better position for a fast, short draw. He wouldn't kill anybody, not if he could help it, but he wouldn't let them harm Duo or himself either, not for something they were innocent of.

"Who are you?" Abe challenged.

"Why'd you send your Hound after that little guy?" Steve asked, stepping forward and clearly taking
charge of the situation.

Duo hesitated and Wufei chewed the inside of his cheek in impotent frustration. He'd not had time to give Duo any details, not that Duo would be able to repeat any if he had. ‘My buddy is a Preventer and we want the little rat for questioning’ would go down like the Libra.

"He caused a friend of mine some trouble," Duo said, his brief hesitation well masked by the easy confidence in his voice. "But I give you my word I wasn't going to hurt him. I just wanted to ask him some questions."

The six men shifted and looked at each other, weighing Duo's words.

"I don't know you," Steve finally declared, turning back to Duo. He said it slowly and deliberately, an open challenge.

"Do you know the guy we're chasing?" Duo countered dryly.

Steve grunted. "No, never talked to him."

The other men looked at each other. Echoes of "Not really", "Never seen him", and "Didn't get a good look" rumbled around the room. Wufei's eyes darted towards the man with the metal pipe, and he noted with interest that the latter had fallen back a few steps and was scowling uncertainly.

Steve had glanced at the pipe-wielder too, waiting for him to speak. When his colleague said nothing and didn't meet his eyes, Steve started to frown. Freeport citizens were sharp. Steve was probably starting to realize he might have been played.

"The guy you're chasing...you don't want him for bounty?" he asked Duo. It wasn't a challenge this time. He said it with the reluctant air of someone who has to ask an unpleasant question to see it settled and forgotten.

Duo's eyes narrowed dangerously and the man closest to him edged back. Wufei could hear the unfeigned fury in Duo's voice as he answered the accusation. "No. The only thing I want from that bastard is an explanation. I'd have let him go afterwards. I'm a freetrader and a fixer, not a bounty hunter," Duo added, his voice striking echoes from the pipes and steel surrounding them, harsh with anger and offended pride. "My name is Duo Maxwell, I live in Makhno. The people from my sector can vouch for me. So can Howard and most of his Sweepers. And where's the guy who fed you this shit-pile? Did he stick around to back that up? Do you know his name?"

The workers fidgeted as if they were being scolded, glancing at each other and then looking away. One of them had looked up in startled recognition when Duo had introduced himself. Wufei saw the mechanic lean forward to whisper to his neighbor. The knowledge seemed to diffuse among the small assembly almost by osmosis. Duo's next words fell into a waiting, respectful silence.

"I give you my word, I only wanted to ask him some questions. It does have something to do with outside, and it's a private matter so I can't give you the specifics. But it's not something I feel ashamed of either. Duo Maxwell does not lie."

Wufei stared at Duo's straight, proud stance, and the way the men measured his words, his attitude. Was this the true currency of Freeport? A man's honor. The trust and backing of his friends. Was this his 'credit'? Simply his word? He remembered how Duo had been so anxious that Wufei might ruin his reputation in Freeport. The colony's population wasn't that big and it was close-knit; a rumor and a name would spread quickly here.

The worker stared at them both. Wufei held himself as he usually did. Better to show them the
arrogant warrior than the man who had a pretty big secret to hide. The familiar Freeport scrutiny weighed him, matched his stance to Duo's. Judged him. It was the look everybody gave him, and he understood it now. It was a look that tried to ascertain where he fit into Freeport's anarchist society; if he was a wolf or a sheep, and above all, if he had enough honor to deal with people fairly, and be dealt with fairly in return.

If he fit anywhere in Freeport, it was thanks to Duo, the cheerful smuggler who had put his own life and reputation in jeopardy to help Wufei accomplish his mission in this dangerous environment. In the heat of the chase, Wufei hadn't thought twice about splitting away from Duo and going off on his own even though he knew a Blade should stick close to his Handler. He'd thought it was just a custom. And it was. But in a place with no rules, no laws, nothing except an archaic trust in honor and tradition, that 'custom' was as strong as an enforceable edict. From now on, he would remember that.

The men glanced at each other, then at Steve. The big mechanic rubbed his bristly hair under a grimy kaki cap, making a scratching noise that scurried away down the corridor.

"Guess that's okay then," he said gruffly, moving to one side. He was leaving them clear access to the exit, but not to the rest of the room or the remaining three corridors where Ferret had vanished.

Duo nodded shortly and walked away without a protest. Wufei would have liked to ask these men some questions; he'd have liked to pursue Ferret, or interrogate the pipe-wielder and find out why the man had covered Ferret's escape. But Steve's simple gesture was a clear warning. Duo's name, word and attitude would allow them to walk out of here without further questions or a fight. It wouldn't get them anything more.

As soon as they'd stepped into the corridor, urgent whispers started up in the junction behind them. As Wufei and Duo made their way through the pipe-cluttered corridor, the whispers washed around them, unintelligible, rising and falling, crashing into waves of arguments and then abating like the sound of surf.

Wufei breatheded deeply as they stepped out of the maintenance tunnel and emerged into the weak light of the sector. Now if they were attacked, they'd have a fighting chance. But he didn't think they would be.

He turned towards Duo as soon as the hatch clanged shut. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have run ahead like that."

Duo glanced at him, apparently surprised at the unsolicited apology. "Oh well, if you hadn't we'd have probably lost him for good. I didn't even see the fucker, the first I knew he was down here was when I saw you throw yourself off the bridge like a maniac. You run fast, Chang. What was that shit back there, about bounty?"

"You saw the man with the pipe?"

"The one skulking near the back like he had something to hide?"

"Yes. He came up with that. I don't think Ferret had the breath or the time to tell him anything, I was only seconds behind him."

"Ferret?"

"A code-name. We don't know his real identity."

"Ferret, Carver...you pigs have way too much imagination." Duo smirked, but there was a hard dark
edge to his smile. His eyes were still angry. "If that was spur of the moment, it was pretty inspired. A lot of people have a price on their head in this colony. The word 'bounty' will get you in more trouble than skinny-dipping in reactor coolant. Good thing you kept your cool back there and didn't fight back, it could have gotten ugly. I-..."

Wufei glanced up at the hesitation. Duo was looking at him from beneath his thick bangs, with a small smile that was different than his usual grin. "Six big bruisers with pipes and hammers coming at you, and you still didn't say a word, break your cover or lose your cool. I'm slightly impressed."

"That made it all worthwhile then," Duo replied, latching on to the teasing tone with some obscure relief and ignoring the strange surge of warmth he'd felt at the half-hidden look.

"So, what's the deal with this 'Ferret' character?" Duo banished the moment with the bright question.

"I'd better tell you when we get home."

They were back in the canal heading towards a ramp leading back up to street level. There were people in the street above, still talking in low voices and glancing around. That reminded him of Joshua. From the way Duo frowned, he'd remembered as well.

"I just wished we could have asked those men some questions," Wufei whispered, angry with himself even though there was little he could have done. "Especially the bastard who helped Ferret get away."

"Oh don't worry, this ain't over. We need to let things cool down a bit, give those guys the opportunity to ask around and check my rep. But tomorrow or the next day, I'll pull some strings. I'll track them down, and if what they hear about me don't satisfy them, then I'll show up with the kind of backing they won't dare to say 'no' to. I got contacts here. Alan Morgenstern himself will put a word in for me. We'll get our info. I really want to have a talk with that guy who tarred us as bounty-dogs."

Duo scowled over his shoulder in the direction of that maintenance room, obviously still extremely pissed about that last accusation. Possibly because it had hit a bit too close to home, Wufei thought uncharitably, and then admonished himself. There was a difference. It was true Duo was getting paid for helping the Preventers catch their man, but despite his pretense to the contrary, Duo was more worried about the crimes his prey had committed than the sum on their heads. Wufei had felt from the start that the money was merely a way for Duo to mark his independence from his one-time allies and show them he was his own man, not some Preventer stooge.

Wufei had his suspicions about Duo's true motives. A word he'd heard a few times now, in different tones of voice, was stirring in his mind. He stared speculatively at Duo's back as they headed out of Kropotkin. He had a lot to think about, what with the murder, Carver's presence and Ferret's appearance, but Wufei wouldn't mind adding one more question to the list. One that concerned a certain brazen smuggler.
"I want to be the minority
I don't need your authority
down with the moral majority
'cause I want to be the minority

I pledge allegiance to the underworld
one nation under dog
in which I stand alone
a face in the crowd
unsung, against the mould
without a doubt,
singed out
the only way I know!"
---Green Day, 'Minority'

"We don't know who Ferret is. We don't know his political affiliations, his origins or his name."

"This is beginning to sound familiar," groused Duo around a mouthful of sandwich.

"We do know he's one of the agitators on X953 who made a bad situation worse." Wufei's words were measured, but his free hand was trying to clench into a fist under a wave of pent-up anger.

Duo's eyes flickered over Wufei's whitening fingers but he didn't say anything as he chewed the bland sandwich distributed by the public commissary. It was some nefarious mixture of ham, spam and reconstituted tomato. Wufei suspected Duo had asked him about Ferret in an effort to distract himself from what he was putting into his mouth. Unfortunately there was nothing else to eat in the house. Duo had run out of more tasty victuals, and since they'd spent the day combing Kropotkin for details about Joshua Brindlow, they'd not had time to barter for better from stall vendors and neighbors.

Despite their efforts, they hadn't learned much. The murdered man was virtually unknown in Kropotkin. Duo had carefully sounded out friends, one-time rebel allies and Sweepers all over the sector, but there was little more information. Only a few people admitted to knowing him by sight or by name. Joshua was a freetrader from Mooncurse. Like Duo, he worked essentially for himself or took commissions for a few big names in utter secrecy. Many people were speculating about what he'd been doing in Kropotkin, but so far nobody had a reasonable guess to offer.

Duo had warned Wufei not to mention Ferret for now. The word 'bounty hunter' still fresh in his mind, Wufei had complied with little protest. He'd learned by now that things couldn't be hurried in Freeport, but neither could they stay hidden for long. They'd get back on Ferret's tracks eventually. For now, time to rest back at Duo's apartment, share information and make some plans.

"Ferret is a murderer and probably a terrorist," Wufei continued. "We're not quite sure what political party he belongs to, he's been spotted with several different groups. And with Carver."

Duo paused with the sandwich halfway to his mouth and let out a low whistle. "Damn. No wonder
you shot off that roof like a bat out of hell to have a lil' talk with him."

"Precisely. Though I think I'd want a talk with him even without that association."

"You mentioned X953? He was mixed up in that shit storm?"

Wufei scowled down at his hand that had gone and fisted itself despite his orders. He forced it to relax. After all the trouble his irascible temper had got him into, real and staged, one would think he'd have learned to control it better by now.

When he spoke, his voice was clipped and neutral, a policeman's voice stating his case to the court.

"The trouble started on the 18th of May on X953 in the Fairview sector. A wake had been organized for one Harold Platter, one of the resistance leaders who'd been killed during the splinter cell infighting that had followed Carver's murders. In hindsight the colony police made a mistake there. They should have told Preventers about this inner strife right away instead of just rubbing their hands and congratulating themselves on seeing the local hotheads kill each other off. The wake turned into civil unrest. Incidents of looting, vandalism, bricks thrown at cops—"

"They build colonies out of metal, plastic and amalgams, but you can always find a brick when you need it," said Duo with the far-off look of one contemplating a fond memory. A reminder that ten years ago, Duo would have been one of those rioting against authority...Despite everything Wufei had seen Duo do in Freeport, the thought still jarred him. He pushed it away to concentrate on those definitely not standing in any grey zone.

"The unrest grew when it was obvious the local police were more interested in suppressing the violence than investigating the murders of the various faction leaders. Rumors started: a 'special Preventer taskforce' was responsible for the deaths of Relena's opponents and the police were covering it up."

"That would be almost too easy to believe," Duo commented dryly.

"I know. The new, more virulent resistance movement that had been born from the infighting was adding fuel to the fire, of course. On the 23rd, in an effort to keep the explosion at bay, the Police Commissioner made a public address to a delegation of People's Representatives and a few thousand demonstrators. Not rioters, just normal, worried people. There were children present. I—"

Wufei picked up his glass of water. The taste of his sandwich had curdled in his mouth. He took a sip. When he continued, his voice was neutral once more.

"Commissioner Heiman did an excellent job. He's well-respected in that colony. He's an ex-rebel, and seen as an opponent to self-centered L2 politicians. Heiman promised a full-scale investigation into the murders, as well as reports of police abuse and brutality. It wasn't going to mean a damn to the wingnut extremists who were capitalizing on the unrest, but it was working with the man on the street, I could see it on the faces of the people listening to him."

"You guys were there already?"

"Yes, the situation had attracted Une's attention. It was too similar to incidents on other colonies, and those had ended badly. Heero had deployed our team to cover the venue, but we stayed out of sight. We didn't want to inflame the situation. We were in the buildings around the stand, ready to intervene, and with cameras on every inch of the crowd. That's how we knew what had happened. When we went over the films later."

Duo sipped his juice and prompted him to continue with a nod. Wufei rubbed the bridge of his nose.
He'd wanted Preventers infiltrating the crowd. He'd wanted sharpshooters on the surrounding rooftops. He'd wanted—... it probably would not have made a difference in the end, and it hadn't been his call.

"Ferret was in the front row. He was standing next to a couple of demonstrators near the police cordon. Somebody started yelling in the crowd. Inflammatory comments. Said that the Commissioner was stalling, that the Preventers were waiting to arrest them all and kill anybody who resisted. While the crowd was distracted, Ferret knifed the person standing in front of him."

Mary Tessler, twenty three. A perfectly innocent bystander who'd been chosen purely on the basis that she was small enough for Ferret to grab and stab in one swift second. She'd died of her injuries in the hospital the next day.

"She screamed. Blood everywhere. One of the policemen ran over to help. The commissioner interrupted himself, the TV cameras centered on the body, and Ferret shouted that the cop had killed her and it was the start of the assault. His accomplice in the crowd shouted "They're firing at us!". People started screaming and shoving. The officer was kneeling next to the victim at this point. Ferret drew out a small caliber and shot him in the neck."

Hubert M'dalo, twenty nine. Divorced, father of one. Fairly good record on the force, with just the kind of small blemishes that justified his posting to L2-X953 and an uneventful career that had ended in the morgue.

"Another man in the crowd started shooting too. The whole thing was a setup. He was aiming at the Commissioner, but he only winged his Lieutenant. The crowd panicked. Other shots were fired at the police."

"And all hell broke loose," Duo concluded.

"Yes. Twenty-one dead, including the first two victims. Hundreds were wounded during that stampede, and then of course the riots started and nothing could stop them. We arrested a lot of the terrorists and extremists on X953, but Ferret slipped through our fingers. It's not the first time either. When his photo was circulated, a colleague of mine recognized him from a similar incident on L3. But we never found him. No wonder if he was hiding out here!"

"And he knew Carver?" Duo asked, ignoring Wufei's hostile glare at the window and the sector outside.

"We caught them together in one surveillance pic, but I don't know if that means much. Carver was seen associating with a lot of terrorists. That's his clientele. We didn't think Ferret had any stronger relationship to Carver than that. Before today."

"Before we catch him ferreting around a murder scene that's got 'Carver' written all over it," Duo concluded with a cat-like grin. "That's got to get your little copper heart beating faster."

"It's certainly interesting," Wufei agreed dryly. He was thinking. He'd been thinking all day. "It's possible that Ferret simply knows Carver by association. Ferret heard about the murder and decided to see if he could learn more about it. I spent hours studying Ferret's case file, what there is of it. He's a slimy piece of work by any standards, he's not above shaking down Carver if he thought he could prove the latter had murdered Brindlow."

"That's one possibility," said Duo, tossing his sandwich on the table. "Or maybe he was keeping an eye on how Kropotkin was reacting to the murder on Carver's behalf."
"That's fairly common," Wufei agreed with a curt nod. "Many criminals can't stay away from their own crime scene. They're worried about what the Preventers are doing, what forensics will turn up, what they might have overlooked. They can't stand the uncertainty, they have to see if we're on their trail already. If they can't check themselves, they'll send a friend or associate."

"Ferret and Carver, associates?"

"Yes. And it's giving me a headache just thinking about it." Wufei scowled into his glass of water. He'd lost all taste for the dubious ham-n-spam sandwich. "Carver is a hitman for political activists and Ferret is an agitator, but having them linked that close together here, in Freeport...that just smells bad."

"Worse than recyc on a warm day," Duo agreed, absently peeling the label from his juice bottle. "Then there's the third parameter of this equation."

"Which is? Ah, Brindlow."

"Yup. What the hell was he doing in a sector where nobody knew him? Trust me on this, Wu. It's not common for people to wander around where they don't have friends, not by themselves. And why did Carver carve him up?"

"I don't know." Wufei rubbed his head as if that could massage the various elements of the problem together into a solution. "Brindlow might have been working with Carver and Ferret."

"And what, they had a falling out?"

"Possibly."

"On the second floor of a building where nobody knew him or seen anybody like Carver before? Above a crèche, for chrissakes? Do you think that's likely?"

"Do you have another explanation?"

"Nope, but you can put that one back on the shelf, Chang, it's cracked."

"We'll see. We certainly need more information about all three of these 'citizens'."

"Then we go back together tomorrow and hunt for that. Tomorrow's gonna be a busy day and we need our beauty sleep. Oh, you gonna need to drop by Scythe first, right?"

Wufei finished his neglected sandwich in three large bites, and swallowed fastidiously rather than answer with his mouth full.

"Why should I want to go to your ship?"

"Well, to send your report, doofus. You've not done it for a week now."

"Oh." Wufei carefully wiped his fingers on the napkin that Duo, after some prodding, had produced from the depths of one of his cupboards for his guest's use. "That's okay. We don't need to."
"You don't? Heero had to report every three days. Tro's gonna want to know how close you are to Carver. Right?" Duo cocked his head to one side.

"I'll report when I have something to report," Wufei grumbled, rubbing harder at the greasy traces on his fingers.

"What about Ferret?"

Wufei paused. Good point. "We'll see if we can find Ferret's tracks, or prove his association to Carver. If it looks like we can track Ferret, I guess I should warn Trowa."

"You guess?" Duo looked downright puzzled now. "I don't think Tro considers it optional. I'm sure he cares about catching a multiple murderer on the A list and nabbing a recidivist agitator and checking on the health of one of his best agents. Right?"

Trowa would definitely want to know about Ferret..."I'll send a message tomorrow evening," Wufei offered, standing up and turning away, tossing his napkin over the back of the chair. "We should have more information about Ferret by then."

"He'll be glad to know Carver's finally shown up too."

"Yes," Wufei answered shortly, heading towards the door. "I'm going to take a shower, then we should get some sleep."

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Wufei pulled the sleeping bag up to his shoulders against the nip of cold in the room, and grunted in response to Duo's 'good night'.

The passage of a cargo train overhead made the two toothbrushes in the glass mug near the sink clink together. Wufei glared at the ceiling. He hadn't flinched much, he was getting used to it, but it was still annoying. He rarely slept more than an hour at a stretch without some noise or other waking him up.

He stared at a splash of neon which had slipped through the shutter to fall onto the floor of Duo's apartment. His eyes traced indentations in the crude linoleum and he remembered how Joshua's blood had trickled and pooled in them back in Kropotkin. There was a shuffle and a squeak of springs from the bed as Duo curled himself up a bit more and huffed sleepily.

"Duo?"

"Hm?"

I wonder- I think you are- I bet I know- I've heard this word now and again and are you-

"Are you a rat-catcher?"

Silence and a slight shift of the bedcovers were his only answer. Wufei frowned at the splash of neon as if he could blame it for the way the question had slipped out. He had his suspicions; he'd planned on questioning the other man, drop hints here and there and watch his reaction. That was the smart way of doing it, the cop way. It was stupid to ask the question directly, since Duo always pretended
not to give a damn about Carver beyond the money and the undatable sister idiocy.

But the intimacy of darkness, lying six feet away from his friend, had somehow disengaged Wufei's reserved and suspicious nature. He'd simply asked instead of thinking it through, thus giving Duo plenty of opportunity to shoot the question down, and Wufei couldn't even watch for that tell-tale flicker of blue eyes. Damnit, he wasn't on his game tonight...

"Where did you hear that word?" Duo finally asked.

"I've heard it several times since I arrived. One of the men today said he could live with me being a rat-catcher but not a bounty hunter."

Duo snorted.

"So I assume it's not the same thing," Wufei concluded.

"You know how I told you that people in a sector watch out for each other?" Duo said after a few seconds of silence.

"Yes."

"Well, they also watch each other, if you know what I mean. We're all a bunch of criminals here, most of us. Even Freeport's few traditions wouldn't keep us in line if we didn't all have a healthy paranoia about what our neighbors are doing."

"That's what I gathered."

"That's normal, okay? Sectors are tight-knit, and if you stumble across something smelly on your home turf, you don't just ignore it. Maybe you'll just tell a neighbor or a Red Band, but you don't let it go unless you know and trust the people involved, in which case you'll give them the benefit of the doubt."

Trust as credit. You could probably get away with murder if your friends believed you had a good enough reason to do it and trusted you. No, not murder, Wufei reminded himself with a grimace. Duels, confrontations and 'accidental death'. Right. If you had to murder somebody, it meant you were hiding something you didn't want your friends and neighbors to know about.

"Now that's the norm, right? That's what a good citizen is supposed to do. But some dumbshits, that's not good enough for them. They don't trust popular pressure to do the job of uncovering the real crimes, the stuff that's been deliberately and carefully hidden. Like murder, rape, hoarding, breaking quarantine, drugs, shit like that. A ratter doesn't just stick to his own sector where he knows who's who, he'll follow the trouble out of his territory and hunt it down in sectors he don't belong in. Ratters are shit-stirrers, plain and simple. And then they go and tattle to the Red Bands, and some rat gets spaced or kicked out or ex-ed."

Wufei measured the scorn in Duo's voice and matched it with the way people spoke about rat-catchers. He frowned in the darkness. "Sounds like a good citizen to me. These 'rats' are doing something that breaks Freeport's-" he interrupted himself as he was about to say 'laws' and rephrased that the Freeport way. "The rats are doing something that can ultimately endanger the colony's survival. Right?"

"...Right." Duo appeared to have noted his change of wording. "Yeah, some see rat-catchers as a necessary evil, or even kinda brave: idiots who put themselves at considerable risk in a place where a lot of the rats would eat them alive, just to make sure nothing's about to blow up in all our faces. But for a lot of other people, ratter is too close to another kinda job."
"Bounty-hunter?"

"Cop. Let's face it, even the non-criminal side of Freeport's population has a knee-jerk reaction to authority. They ain't gonna shower with affection anything that even whiffs of pig. As I said, it's a stupid job."

"But someone's got to do it. Do you?"

"Do I look stupid to you?"

Wufei rolled over onto his stomach and propped himself up on his elbows, eyeing the dark lump in the bed. "From the way you've been avoiding answering my question with a direct 'no' from the start, you've already told me all I wanted to know, but I'll be polite and answer you directly instead of waffling. Yes, you do look that stupid to me."

"Oy!" A rustle of bedclothes and Wufei caught a gleam of light off of a pair of affronted blue eyes.

"Duo, you sat yourself onto ten tons of H-fuel barely balanced on a couple of Verniers and then you single-handedly attacked an entire army. That's beyond stupid in my books. Becoming a cop in a den of lawless anarchists is in effect a smart career move for you."

"Hi Pot, my name's Kettle."

"Granted, I did the same during the war, and I'm in the same position you are in Freeport today, but that's exceptional for me," Wufei pointed out didactically. "Most of the time I have the power and authority of the law behind me. That does make things a lot easier."

"Yeah, I guess nobody despises you for doing your job," Duo grumbled.

Wufei's mouth shut abruptly over what he was about to say next.

There was a scratching noise from the bed, then Duo continued in a soft voice.

"It's just...those of us who do this - and it's not a full time job, right? It's more like keeping your ears open and your curiosity on medium broil. But...me and Cesar and the others who are dumb enough to do this, it's because we know how fragile Freeport is. It wouldn't take many leaks in this hull to breach us. It's something that's gotta be done. Like cleaning out the garbage. We gotta make sure this station doesn't get full of Carvers and Ferrets until the Preventers have no choice but to come shut us down. How did you guess, though?"

In the distance, somebody shouted a greeting. People had started to trickle back from their day in the shipyards. The streets were about to get noisy.

"I suppose, hanging around me, for an investigator of your caliber, it musta been pretty obvious, huh? Fei?"

"...Hm?"

"You've gone awfully quiet."

Wufei dragged his eyes away from the slice of light that lay on the floor like a pointed finger. He tried to think of something to say, but his usual sarcasm had deserted him.

"What's up?" Duo asked, propping himself up onto his elbows.

"Nothing," Wufei answered. "Why did you say you were selfish?"
"What?"

"When you first told me about anarchy, you said it was selfish. That you, and everybody else in Freeport, only cared about your own freedom and survival."

There was a short silence and then a fairly grumpy: "Yeah?" Duo's voice informed him that he didn't like the direction this was heading. Wufei didn't heed the warning.

"I think being a ratter disqualifies you from the 'selfish' club," he pointed out neutrally.

Duo flopped back against his pillow as if he intended to ignore the question. Wufei settled back down into the sleeping bag again. The bit about being a rat-catcher was important information, something Wufei should have been informed of. He'd find a way of berating Duo over the man's secretive nature at a later date. Duo Maxwell was way too used to playing everything close to the chest which, considering his second profession of being an investigator in a nest of criminals, was hardly surprising. But this last question was personal. If Duo didn't want to answer, then that was fair enough.

"Couldn't do it..."

It was barely a murmur. Wufei twisted his head to glance up from his pillow, not that he could see anything except for a mound of covers on the dark shape that was the bed.

"What?" He kept his voice soft, a mere whisper.

There was silence, but it was the silence of somebody ordering their thoughts.

"When the war was over...Of course I cared." Duo's voice was still low, but it didn't hide the raw bitterness. "I fought just as hard for it all. Fuck it, I lived in L2 during two civil wars, if Une thinks I don't give a damn about peace, she can suck my-..."

There was more silence. Somebody started singing outside; it sounded like a dirge. It was probably a Russian love song.

"I just...don't work well under authority. Give me an order, I'll give you the finger. Give me a rule, I'll do my damn best to break it. I spent too long under the Alliance, I guess. I don't trust nobody who tells me what to do. Except for...well, except for a few privileged guys who've fucking well earned it.

"During the war, a coalition of colony rebel forces asked me to join them. They wanted my help to form an alliance for The Future. Big fucking whoop. And in that Future, who takes out the garbage? Who makes the rules? Who obeys them? Who goes down into the mines and who stays on top and counts the profit? That fucking matters as much as their goddamn ideals, yanno. Just beating OZ isn't good enough. Then it's just some other mob that takes over with ideas that aren't yours, and you go back to fighting them and another church- another civil war happens. Just stupid, man.

"And yeah, I know about the greater good. But behind the greater good, there's always a minority getting fucked over. That's how the universe works. The little details count for me, 'cause I used to be one."

"You don't believe in what we are doing?" Wufei asked. He didn't blame Duo. He'd had his own doubts after the war.

Duo was silent for even longer this time. When he spoke, his voice was strangely controlled; unusual for the mercurial smuggler.
"No, I think you guys are doing the right thing. But I can't fight on your side, not in this war. I can't fight for the greater good and the big picture if I have to ignore the twelve-year old hooker getting paid in drugs in an L2 slum while the politicos are too busy rebuilding the nice places first. I'm...I have to see what I'm fighting for. It's got to have a face, a body and a voice. Heero is a bit the same. That's why he never blamed me for cutting bait and running to Freeport. He believes in Relena. That's easier to believe in than Peace with a capital P. Now, Relena's sweet, and some of her ideas are good, but she's never eaten a rat. She can't tell me what's best for me and mine if she's never had to eat a rat."

"Relena has survived two wars, she knows the cost-"

"A society with ghettos is at war. It's just not the kind of war that has tanks and Gundams."

Wufei was silent, his eyes fixated once more on the dagger of light on the floor. He wondered if they would ever had had this conversation in the light of day.

"That's why I live in Freeport. Because it's small and crazy and it don't have no rules. Just like me, huh? So Une turned out to be right on one point. You can slap me with a medal the size of a soup plate, but once the war is over, Duo Maxwell ain't no hero. He's a street rat who cares about his next meal, his safety, that of his gang of friends and nothing else. That's why I'm selfish, Chang. Now go to sleep."

Wufei was silent. He rolled onto his back, put his hands behind his head and stared at the darkness until little blue and red lights danced in his vision.

"I believe in Justice," he said into the darkness and the silence.

"We know," Duo groused into his pillow.

"I believe in law and order and the greater good. Rules protect the weak, they keep people safe. More than that, they give us all a sense of direction, of belonging. They shape a society. I know they hide parasites, monsters and cowards. I won't throw the rules away just because of that, though. I'll fight to purge them instead." Whatever the cost to himself or others.

"Good for you." Duo's voice was a sneer, but here in the darkness, Wufei could distinguish the facets behind the tone. Duo sounded sad too, and weary.

"I don't agree with most of your choices," Wufei said slowly, "but they were not mine to make. I do, however, respect your decision to seek out your own battleground rather than finding comfort in blindly following orders you did not believe in. You don't keep your head down like a coward, either. In fact you put yourself at considerable risk, being a rat-catcher in this pit you call home. You found a fight where you could make a difference, and you stand true to your own code of honor. You were not lying to those men we faced today. You have nothing to be ashamed of."

There was a small silence.

"Humph. So I'm living in stinky old anarchist Freeport, I'm doing the most unpopular job there is, even lower than the trolls in recyc, I'm good for the tar and feathers if they find out I sneak the pigs in, but at least I have the Chang seal of approval. I can die happy now."

Wufei allowed the smile to reach his lips, here in the darkness. Duo's sarcasm felt like a reflex, and there was a droll humor behind it that removed the sting.

"You're not allowed to die, Maxwell. You're too useful to us. Trowa has given us clear orders: I'm to find Carver and you are to stay alive."
"Man, an order I actually want to follow for once."

"Good. Make sure that you do."
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*If I can't dance, it's not my revolution!*
---Emma Goldman

The large hangar was overrun with computers. Outmoded processor cabinets lined the walls, humming like a swarm of drones, and modern laptops were strewn on every flat surface that the coffee cups hadn't yet colonized. Dozens of people rushed around with modern miniaturized net-links hanging from their ears like alien parasites controlling them. The air was alive with the swish of small ventilators desperately trying to cool each unit. Wufei felt warm for the first time in weeks.

Most of the activity centered around a huge backlit board hanging from the ceiling dead centre of the room, displaying a stock exchange listing. Wufei read a few names as they passed under it: shipping and shipbuilding companies, mining corporations, satellite concerns and such.

"Where is he...?" Duo muttered, standing on his toes to get a better look over the heads and computer banks. "Ah, over there. C'mon."

Wufei followed his friend as Duo made his way through the maze of people, cables and computers, his goal a tall lean man in his sixties at the back of the big room. There was nothing to distinguish him from the other people busying themselves around the hangar; if anything he was the worst dressed of the lot, in drab, grey utilitarian overalls that were the type of free clothing Freeport distributed if you had nothing else. He was staring perplexed at a bank of electronics, fiber optic cables dangling from his hand, when Duo walked up to him.

"Alan Morgenstern? I don't know if you remember me, sir-"

"Do you know which socket this thing needs to be plugged into to allow a secure connection into a hardwired firewall?" the man asked without looking around.

Duo paused, then reached over, took one of the connectors the man was holding and stuck it into the appropriate port.

The small holo-screen off to one side blinked twice and flashed a red Secured pop-up window before giving way to a command prompt.

"Wonderful, thank you," the man murmured. He typed in a few commands, locked the unit and then turned toward them.

The appearance of being wooly-headed was immediately banished. Morgenstern had been focused on what he was doing, and now that focus was on them. It was like being looked over by a laser sight. Wufei straightened under the Freeport Stare fueled by what he was willing to bet was considerable intelligence and a great knowledge of human behavior.

Duo had given him a quick rundown of the man they were about to meet on their way over to Kropotkin. "Morgenstern is a colonist; the in vitro, better-than-standard kind. Son of a great family. Very rich. He was the head of a mining colony when he was younger. He directed it a bit like a communist collective, but he made damn sure it earned money too. Then the Earthers shot Heero
Yuy the First and stormed Space. They told him that if he surrendered, he could stay on as governor under their orders. His answer was to take over the comms network, give a great 'Freedom or Death' speech and sabotage all docking rings on his colonies 'xcept those for escape pods. The Alliance kinda took that as a No and tried to capture him. Morgenstern shot his way out and made it to Freeport. Been here ever since. Great guy, and what he doesn't know about Kropotkin could fit on a candy wrapper. He's a shoo-in for Elder when the Kropotkin sector's seat becomes vacant."

According to Duo, Morgenstern's financial savvy and his knowledge of politics and economy led him to broker Freeport Corporation's business deals, as appointed and overseen by the Elders. Wufei wasn't surprised that the man behind those sharp blue eyes was up to such a responsibility.

"Duo Maxwell, what a pleasant surprise. Your timing is as exquisite as always. I need an electronics expert and you pop up out of the ground. I should have realized you were a magician. According to Monique Desjean, that's the only way you could possibly be coping with all the work she sends your way."

Duo grinned, looking a bit bashful. "Ah, ain't that much work. Other guys help too. And anybody here coulda told you what socket to use."

"I should know it myself," Morgenstern sighed. "Twenty years of using these things and I still can't tell a port from a plug. How are you?"

"Fine, fine. How about you? Still busy keeping us all afloat? How's Freeport doing in the big picture?"

"As near to the edge of disaster as always," Morgenstern answered wryly. He had a fine patrician accent that reminded Wufei of Khushrenada and Marquise. It clashed with Morgenstern's starkly simple clothes. "Our competitors are finally getting their act together, shipping is starting to recover from the impact of the war and the price of oxygen filters keeps climbing."

"Damn." Duo rubbed the back of his neck. "Anything I can do?"

"If you and all your friends stopped breathing for one hour every day, you wouldn't believe the money we'd save," Morgenstern pointed out thoughtfully. When Duo snorted with laughter, he smiled. "But enough about my sordid business deals, they're far too boring for young men like yourselves. What can I do for you?" His eyes flickered over Wufei, old and wise.

"It's like this." Duo's voice dropped and Morgenstern leaned forward to hear him over the whirr of machines and the echoes of voices. "Did you hear about that murder yesterday?"

Morgenstern's face grew hard. "I'd be hard put to not hear about it, it happened two blocks from here."

"Right, right. I'm sort of looking into that."

"Why?" Morgenstern asked quite reasonably. Wufei had also been caught short by Duo's outright admission. He'd expected more of Duo's underhand truths. The rat-catcher had underlined last night how important it was to keep his 'second profession' as discreet as possible.

"Well, you know Marta Bernstein?" Duo asked conspiratorially.

The financier gave Duo a searching look. "No. Should I?"

"Probably not, she's not from this sector. It was her man who was murdered."
"Ah."

"Yeah. I know her, you see," Duo confided, not untruthfully of course, though his tone implied they were old friends rather than brought together for a few minutes by tragedy. "And her man Josh was a solo freetrader like me. Us lone wolves, we don't have friends in high places to come looking for answers when we kick the bucket, so we learn to watch out for each other."

"Don't be ridiculous, Duo. There would be many friends investigating your death if Freeport ever had the misfortune of losing you," said Morgenstern, shaking his head.

Duo waved that away casually. "Anyway, I want to know why Josh died. And hell, I bet you guys do too. Kro is one of our best sectors, you all run a tight ship. This kinda shit don't go down around here. So...know anything?"

"I know quite a lot," Morgenstern replied dryly. "I've been living in this sector for twenty years. But I don't know anything about the murder specifically. I didn't even know the name of the dead man until now. The Mumbai stock exchange took a dip yesterday and I've been busy as hell these past twenty four hours."

Duo's face fell. "Damn, I was hoping you might have heard something. I know you help organize watches and guard duties on the streets and such...Oh well, it was worth a try."

Duo sighed and started to turn away, then he appeared to remember something. Wufei forced himself to stay relaxed and unreadable as the real question they wanted answered poked its nose into the conversation. "Oh yeah, by the way, while I was asking around on Marta's behalf yesterday, I saw some shifty guy hanging around."

"Shifty? How?"

"S'probaby nothing," Duo replied lightly, fingering the end of his braid. "He might have just been curious, but he, I dunno, he looked a bit...shifty, yanno? Then when I tried to ask him a question, he ran off."

"Oh. That is strange. Then again, he might have been a bit intimidated." Morgenstern's eyes raked pointedly over Duo, then Wufei.

"Could be. Maybe you know him? Tiny guy, smaller than me. Looks like a rat. Long nose, beady eyes, grey hair."

"That's not much of a description," Morgenstern snorted. "But no, that doesn't resemble anyone from Kropotkin that I know, and I know most of its citizens."

"Ah, okay. Say, you guys got problems with the pipeworks?"

Morgenstern blinked, obviously caught off guard by the change of subject. "What?"

"When we were looking for Rat-face yesterday, we noticed a crew going down into the undersetector. We were too busy to really look into it closely; we just thought they were workers. I hope they were legit." Duo's face scrunched up in concern and he twisted his braid in his fingers like a little boy who was afraid he'd accidentally screwed up.

"I think we do have some work being done, as it were. I'm sure that's what it was," Morgenstern answered dismissively.

"Oh good. Do you know the name of one of those guys? I might just check it up. Don't want some
bastards stealing pipes and circuits outta your nice sector. Besides, if they're doing something mechanical maybe I can help."

Morgenstern hesitated. "I certainly don't mind, if you're so inclined. I'll check and see if they need an extra pair of hands or two. I'll be right back. And there's something I'd like to discuss with you anyway. Your arrival here today is fortuitous-" his voice faded into the ambient hum as he headed towards a series of office doors off to one side.

Duo's eyes hooded as he followed the man's progress. "Damn. He's going to get on my case to move here again," he muttered.

"Move here?"

"Yeah. I told you before, Kro's got a lot of rebels and such here. Also long-standing fans of anarchy like Morgenstern and a bunch of retired Sweepers. All these guys live here and work together, they're the backbone of Freeport. Morgenstern is always keen to get more of the same living in the sector. He says they're the only kind who truly understand space and want to defend her. He should know what he's talking about; Morgenstern was one of the financial backers for Peacemillion."

Wufei looked with renewed interest at the office door. "Really? I didn't know that."

"Oh yeah, many in Freeport pitched in with help or cash, but the colony kept it quiet, otherwise the Ozzies would have sent a big bomb this way. There was some debate about Freeport joining the war. Morgenstern and others got very vocal about it, I heard. But in the end, Freeport stayed neutral. Peacemillion was built and manned by Sweepers, but it didn't have any weapons. I think she did the job anyway, right?"

"Definitely." Wufei now understood why Duo talked about Morgenstern with respect despite the financier's wealthy upbringing being so different from the L2 orphan's. But if Morgenstern thought he could sweet-talk Duo into moving here, he had another think coming. Kropotkin might be full of anarchists, but it would still feel too constraining to Shinigami. It would imply a complicated set of alliances and obligations, and Duo Maxwell wasn't the kind to abide even the lightest of reins.

The financier took a good twenty minutes to reappear. Duo paced around in a narrow circle while Wufei examined the stock board with interest. Steel prices were going up, which wasn't good news for Freeport's shipbuilding industry.

It was strange to see this little island of capitalism in the midst of the mess of extreme politics that dominated Freeport. Though truth be told, Wufei found that very little in Freeport could surprise him that much anymore. Survival, he reminded himself dryly. Freeport might believe in freedom and sharing of wealth, but its main philosophy was practicality. Money was more important than ideals in the real world, so this crummy hangar full of people, who were probably all volunteers, produced it for the rest of the colony.

Finally Morgenstern emerged from his office and headed back to them. He was stopped twice before he could reach them by harried people with the parasitic net-links growing out of their ears.

"Steve Millen," Morgenstern declared after shooing away the interruptions. "He was the foreman of the workers you ran into. Water pressure has been uneven in the edges of the sector, he and his men were trying to track down the cause. I gave him a call. He thanks you, but he doesn't need any help. They figured out the problem and fixed it."

"Ah, well and good then. Thanks, we'll be on our-"
"Hold up, Duo. Maybe you and your friend could step into my office?"

Duo rubbed the back of his head and smiled apologetically. "We're in a bit of a rush. Always too much to do and not enough time."

"Yes, I keep telling the Elders they should increase the day cycles to thirty hours for our convenience," Morgenstern deadpanned. Then he grew serious. "It shouldn't take too long. Let me just give you a quick outline. As you know, I'm proud of my sector. We house many strong-willed colonists, men and women who've made space what it is, free and beholden to none, an equal to Earth."

Duo was nodding during the speech and shifting from one foot to the other as if ready to dash. "I know, I know, s'a great place, I got friends here, but I'm happy in Makhno. I told you that already."

"I know, and I understand the advantages of Makhno for a mechanic. But I was hoping to discuss the future of your friend."

Duo blinked. So did Wufei.

"Say what?"

"Your friend. Ah, may I address him? It seems rude to- I'm not familiar with the traditions regarding Blades."

"Well...not really," Duo answered, perplexed.

Morgenstern hesitated and then he smiled at Duo. "I guess I'll have to wait for his quarantine to end, then. But when it does, I hope he'll consider moving to Kropotkin. We would be proud and honored to have a warrior of his caliber here. We have, ah, many retired suit pilots in this sector, honorable defenders of the colonies. He should feel at home."

"Right." Duo's smile looked a bit forced.

"And of course if you two are, ah, attached in any way, my offer to you still stands, Duo. You're both quite welcome to come-"

It took Duo a good five minutes to extricate himself as politely as possible.

"That was a civil and roundabout way of saying he knows who I am," Wufei muttered as they walked the streets of Kropotkin. It was the sector's 'evening'. Its citizens manned stalls, chatted at corners or went to visit friends.

"Yeah, Morgenstern is smooth. You have to give him that," Duo agreed. "And always keen to rope in good people into his sector. Say, could anybody who knows your past trace your present?"

Wufei glanced at the smuggler whose hooded eyes were sweeping the streets carefully. "No," he answered, rather relieved himself. "Une did not want the potential political nightmare that would come from the senate knowing she'd integrated three out of five of the notorious Gundam pilots into her supposedly impartial organization. There is no Chang Wufei in the-...in the Lady's lot," Wufei embroidered in case they were overheard. "The pilot of Shenlong disappeared shortly after the war, and there are rumors he's attending a university in China."

"Ah, okay." Duo beamed expansively. "Good, one less thing to worry about. Now we just have to worry about dodging Morgenstern's well-meaning attempts to settle you down in Kro. S'funny, he never drooled like that over Heero. Then again, you're friendlier than Heero...if one goes down to the
“Now what?” he growled, refusing to be drawn into a put-down match.

“Now we hunt down the man who let Ferret get away, then we hunt down Ferret and, if we're lucky and they have any kind of link, we find Carver at the end of it all. Oy, citizen. Yeah, spare me a minute? Ever heard the name Steve Millen? He lives in Kropotkin and we're not sure of his address.”

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“Nope, I don't know the name of the guy you were chasing,” Steve Millen told them a bit nervously. Getting a call from such a well-respected figure as Morgenstern had more than confirmed Duo's credit. Steve Millen was indeed the Steve who'd been the foreman of the team they'd run into the day before, but his attitude had done a one-eighty.

“I've seen that rodent face around Kropotkin a few times,” the foreman added helpfully. “He was just wandering around. Never saw him talking to anybody. Which is a bit strange, I guess...” Millen looked like he'd only now thought of it.

“And the guy who accused me of being a bounty hunter?” Duo inquired, making Millen cringe. "Did he have a good explanation for that?"

"Herb. Herb Spasson," Millen growled. "And we asked him for a good explanation as soon as you gents left, let me tell you. He said the rat-faced guy was a friend of his, a good citizen and someone who's got connections. I kinda doubt the last two. This 'good citizen' apparently told Herb something as he ran by, sounded like bounty. Herb said he might have misunderstood." Millen's face looked sour. Freeport citizens depended a lot on their ability to assess people and situations; Millen was probably aware that he'd been manipulated somewhere along the line. "Herb's buddy is wanted on the outside, so Herb thought you were bounty dogs. That's why he stopped your man. Um, you realize that the rest of us, we didn't know about any of this, but I've worked with Herb before, and Abe, and we thought- I mean, I hope you realize there wasn't any offense intended."

Duo waved away the start of yet another apology. "S'okay, Steve, I understand. You reacted like any good citizen would. I hope if some bounty hunter chases me down the ducts one day, there'll be strong arms like yours and the lads at my back."

"Sure thing, sure thing," Millen assured him, nodding vigorously.

"I'd like a word with Herb, though. I won't put the hurt on him or anything, but I want to make sure we got that bounty business straightened out. You know Freeport, you can pick up a bad rep easier than a suspicious itch in this place."

Millen examined Duo's sharp grin for a minute. Wufei had the impression of someone who was a bit slow reaching a conclusion, but whose intuition was sound for all that.

"I have your word on that? Not hurting him? Herb isn't exactly a friend, but he's a good plumber, we worked on several ship berths together...I guess you can call him a crewmate. If I tell you..."

"You have my word I won't hurt him," Duo said solemnly. Wufei, used to Duo's brand of truths by
now, noticed that Duo hadn't promised not to scare Herb to within an inch of his miserable lying life. "I won't tell him who sent me, if you don't want-"

"No," was the firm answer. "Steve Patrick Millen does not rat out someone behind their back. If Herb asks you who sent you, feel free to tell him who it was and that I think you're owed an explanation and an apology."

Duo nodded once. "Very well."

"Right. Herb lives in Haymarket, on the corner of Tenth Avenue right up against the sector wall to Kropotkin. His area was also having pressure problems, which is why he was helpin' us with those gauges. But I bet he won't be at home today. He'll have gone to his woman's sector, Vanzetti. They're having a free day. He's been talking about it for a week now."

"His woman?"

"Agostina Assisi. She lives near the forward lock of the sector, but I'm not sure where."

"I wonder what Ferret was doing in Kropotkin those times Steve saw him," Duo mused, keeping his voice down in view of the few stragglers in the street who hadn't gone to bed yet.

"Business?"

"Not in Kro. People in Kropotkin deal with shipbuilding, finance, exports and imports and Freeport's mainframe, not small-time deals. There's not that many strangers going in and out of the sector as a result. They're also what you would call law-abiding citizens, if that had any meaning here. Not the kind to mix with Ferret."

Duo seemed to have a high opinion of Kropotkin. Wufei couldn't help remembering that both Ferret and Carver seemed to frequent the sector - full of ex-rebels and downfallen revolutionaries - and that Joshua had been murdered there.

"Millen's testimony places Ferret there 'a few times'," he pointed out. "Enough occasions that Millen could remember him when seeing him run through a dimly lit tunnel. Even if he- what's going on here?"

"Fiesta!" Duo exclaimed as the airlock swished open and revealed teeming streets filled with raucous laughter and music.

"What are they celebrating?"

"Being alive, as far as I can tell," said Duo, watching a couple near the airlock rub against each other in a way that suggested that clothing would soon go flying.

"All sectors have one day every month where nobody goes to work," Duo explained when Wufei made a growling noise to prompt him for a bit of elaboration. "It's our weekends and holidays all rolled into one. In Makhno, people go and see friends, or just stay home and sleep, but other sectors decide to make a party out of it."
"We'll never find Spasson in this crowd," said Wufei loudly enough to be heard over the noise.

"We'll find Assisi's place, but I bet they're both out here painting it red," Duo agreed. "Maybe we can wander around the party. Have a bit of fun ourselves. Or not," Duo added with a grin as he caught sight of Wufei's scowl.

Oil drums and metal garbage cans were being used for make-shift bonfires. People had hung lanterns or lit candles in every window, fighting off Freeport's usual murk. Kids ran around shrieking and waving blue glow tubes normally used for emergency lighting in space. Sheets were stretched across the narrower streets like banners and playgrounds had been turned into potluck picnics. The roads were packed with people chatting, laughing and moving about in a relaxed way that contrasted with the tidal movements of tired workers heading to and from factories on normal days.

Duo asked around for Assisi's address. His search took them past a construction site that had been transformed into an impromptu concert pit. A bank of cheap speakers whined, saturating on the bass, screeching out something that was only distantly related to music as far as Wufei was concerned. The 'singer' appeared to be throwing up in a microphone, repeating 'Death - war - death - war' over and over again, bent over double as if he'd taken a shot to the stomach. In front of the slapped-together stage, a pack of young men and women were throwing themselves around like rabid rats, heaving in piles of limbs as they bounced around.

Duo glanced over at it approvingly, head moving in time with the crash of synth drums. Wufei glared at the scene reprovingly, causing a couple of young girls who'd been heading towards the area at a run to stop dead in their tracks and detour around him. He'd seen this kind of frenzy in the clubs of Neo-Tokyo. There was something about being at the mercy of gangs, overzealous police and poverty that brought out violence in even the most innocent and hapless of citizen. People danced like they were exorcising demons. Wufei had found it disturbing in the slums, but here in Freeport, without any riot police if it got out of hand, it was alarming.

"Oy, relax. It's just fun." Duo had apparently caught Wufei's glower and interpreted it pretty accurately.

"That sort of fun escapes me," Wufei growled, staring at a vigorous fistfight that had broken out at the edge of the crowd, blows landing nearly in time with the 'music'.

"Really? Cause I bet it'd do you a world of good," Duo drawled wickedly. His steps had picked up a certain bounce as he'd walked by, as if the raw dangerous energy was uplifting him.

"Why does it have to be so violent?" Wufei muttered, glancing back at the writhing creature made of limbs. "You people live in such desperate conditions already, why make it worse?" He wasn't only talking about the dancing, if that was what one could call the active pursuit of multiple contusions. Wufei's exasperated bewilderment covered every skirmish, fight and duel he'd seen in Freeport since he'd arrived.

Duo shrugged. "Blows off steam. This tin can is under pressure, man. Freeport is the last stop, the last chance. People get hounded here. The Outside is the enemy and they're always at our doorstep. There's never been a regime out there that didn't want to get rid of Freeport one way or another. Right?"

Wufei countered Duo's pointed look with a steady one of his own. As far as he was concerned, though Freeport wasn't quite the cesspit he'd supposed it to be - by a narrow margin - he was still convinced it desperately needed some kind of order, and he wasn't ashamed of his conviction.

Duo snorted softly as if he could read the thought scrolling across Wufei's forehead. "We live with
death, Chang. We walk in the shadow of the valley. We find extreme ways of remembering we're still alive, still kicking. We let the violence out on a leash so it don't slip out later."

"It's just mass hysteria and a waste of energy," Wufei sniffed, not impressed. "Look, here's an acceptable pastime and a good way of burning off some negative energy."

They'd moved on to the next intersection where a group of fifty people had congregated. Half a dozen of them were playing guitars, tambourines and an accordion, a lively little tune, and singing in some European language which Wufei thought was Italian. People danced vigorously in pairs, or singly with exaggerated gestures to the amusement of friends clapping on the sidelines, egging them on.

"You like the accordion?" Duo quizzed, giving Wufei a funny look.

"Not particularly," Wufei ground out, "but at least this pursuit won't leave bruises. It doesn't revel in death, war and revolution, it-

Duo laughed so hard he had to stop and lean forward to catch his balance. Some of the dancers turned to stare.

"Maxwell," Wufei growled in a low voice, poking him. "What's so funny? I just-

His hand was snatched up. He tried to jerk away, but a grip on his waist blocked him.

Duo's body was pushing against his, spinning them around. Wufei's loose hair fluttered across his face and into his open mouth. He stepped back to regain his balance just as Duo moved forward to the beat - then the hand that had grabbed Wufei's lifted it above his head, forcing him back against a hard, lean arm holding him by the waist.

"Bella ciao, o bella ciao, bella ciao ciao ciao," Duo murmured right next to Wufei's ear as the singers on stage hit the refrain.

Wufei's mouth was open in a protest that was too big to voice. He'd turned his head instinctively.

Duo's last words whispered against his lips.

He was just as suddenly released. Wufei caught his footing, took a sharp breath in - then remembered the spectators. He stuttered and sputtered, and Duo laughed. But there was no mockery in it, or in the hand that swept Wufei's hair out of his eyes.

"You should see your face. Come on, let's go find Herb. We'll leave these people to their - hah! - peaceful lil' song. Bella ciao, o Bella ciao, Bella ciao, ciao, ciao..."

Wufei stared after the unrepentant joker, too stunned to even be properly angry, though that was surely a momentary aberration on his part. He pulled himself together, cowed with a glare the nearby couples who'd been laughing at his flushed cheeks, and followed the dark-clad figure, glaring holes into Duo's shoulder blades.

Bloody Maxwell. So typical.

Yesterday morning in the yard, with Wufei moving through the cold air smelling of metal...a moment outside of everything, a moment Duo had shared. When Duo had left and Wufei hadn't stopped him, it had established an unspoken agreement between them. It didn't need words; it was an understanding between two men who concentrated on their duty before pleasure. It was understood. There might or might not be something there between them, living in that instant. A slim possibility, a ghost of an attraction barely acknowledged. One they did not have the time, energy or luxury to
Last night and this morning, Wufei had changed in the shower room and Duo had gotten dressed while Wufei was out. Neither of them commented on the change of habit. When Wufei had practiced his forms the night before, Duo had worked at his bench and the door to the yard had stayed shut. Wufei had approved, ignoring the feeling of absence that lingered like a shared glance. They discussed the case, politics and Freeport's society, but no longer anything personal, especially related to anybody's sexuality or preferences. A clear line had been drawn. Wufei avoided it by a wide margin while Duo, not surprisingly, danced right along its edge.

Wufei's irritation felt more like a reflex than honest outrage. He didn't really resent Duo for the little infringements on the no-man's land between them: the touch that lingered on his skin a second longer than it should as Duo handed him an N-bar instead of tossing it at him; the one-off cheeky innuendo on the shuttle to Kropotkin; the way Duo had looked at him from the corner of his eye, an appreciate smirk on his face, when Wufei came in from his exercises, sweating in the t-shirt he'd conscientiously kept on this time...Wufei knew that if you slapped a rule on Duo, he'd be doing his damnedest to break it three seconds later. It was his nature. Maybe that was why Wufei couldn't get fully mad at the blasted adrenaline junky. It would be like kicking a kitten for clawing at the curtains.

Or maybe Duo had been slipping some of Chris's 'cheer-me-ups' into Wufei's tea. That might be an alternative explanation for Wufei's unusual forbearance.

Duo, apparently unconcerned by the glower aimed like a bulls-eye at his braided head, was tunelessly humming the song and murmuring the refrain as they walked towards the edge of the sector. A few inquiries pointed them towards Assisi's house where they'd probably have a wait. Spasson and his woman would be out, enjoying the party.

Or so they thought. But when Duo knocked on the door it flew open, causing both men to start back in alarm.

"Ah, so you decided to come back- huh? Who are you two?"

The woman was a few inches taller than Wufei and extremely buxom to the point of fat. She was in her thirties, her skin a healthy olive that refused to succumb to colonist pallor. Luscious black curls highlighted a plump, pleasant face. She was wearing a long black skirt and a very small sleeveless blouse. The latter was dangerously close to slipping off at any second, especially since she was huffing self-righteously.

"Agostina Assisi?" Duo asked a bit doubtfully.

"Yes? What do you two want?" was the impatient answer.

"We were wondering if Herb was around?" Duo asked, recovering quickly and turning on the charm.

Wufei's observations so far were that the Maxwell smile could conquer anything feminine, but not this time. The brunette started to huff all the more.

"That...fink isn't here." Her anger sounded strained, there was hurt behind it...hurt and something else that prickled Wufei's instincts.

"Oh?" Duo looked artfully surprised. "But what about the fiesta? Surely he was going to want to escort a lovely lady such as yourself."

Wufei managed not to roll his eyes. Assisi, for her part, finally focused on Duo and then flushed and
smiled timorously.

"You'd think so. I know he was looking forward to it. We don't get many reasons to have fun in this tin can. But a couple of friends of his showed up half an hour ago, just as I was getting ready. They said Herb had to go to the shipyards, there was work that needed doing."

Duo tsked. "Damn, what a pity I missed him. What ship is he working on, signora?"

Assisi crossed her arms under her rather expansive chest. The gesture was defensive. Wufei noticed that her eyes kept flickering between them towards a spot further down the hallway.

"That's what I asked when Herb told me he had to leave," she said, anger still prowling in her voice. "He said he was needed at the Christie. An urgent plumbing job. Then he left."

"...The Christie?" Duo's eyes had narrowed, his smile became fixed. "Didn't they finish the Christie ten days ago? They moved her out of Zero G dock last week."

"I don't know. I work in the factories, I don't follow the ships. Herb hadn't worked on the Christie for nearly a month. I guess...that some plumbing he did sprung a leak."

Duo's smile was now completely fake. "I see. You're probably right. Hey, who were these friends who showed up to warn Herb that he was wanted? At the Christie, I mean. I think I might know them."

Agostina looked down at the floor. "Well, the guy who actually talked to Herb was a friend of his. I've seen him before down in Mooncurse when I go visit my sister. Al. Or Ed. Or Hal, something short at any rate. He's short too, and he's got a face like a beleta, how do you say it? A weasel. He told Herb they had to leave right away, they were needed at the shipyards."

"You mentioned two friends?" Duo prompted when Agostina didn't look like adding more.

The black eyes lined in khol refused to meet Duo's. "The beleta did all the talking."

"But he wasn't alone?" Duo asked softly.

"He had a friend waiting outside the door," Agostina muttered, her eyes flickering again to that empty spot behind Wufei and Duo. "I...don't know him. I mean, I didn't see much of him. He was in the shadow." Agostina's accent - L3, working class - was suddenly more pronounced.

"Can you describe him?"

Agostina was twisting a decorative shawl in her fingers. "Didn't see much of him," she whispered almost to herself. "He was tall, with a square face. I mean, I think. Didn't see him very well. He might have had brown hair, and a - a long brown coat...He..."Agostina's eyes were now liquid and worried. She gulped and looked Duo sharply in the face. "Is Herb in trouble? What is this about?"

"Nothing," Duo answered gently. "We wanted to talk to Herb about some guy we both know, but if he's busy at the yards, we'll drop by another day. Enjoy the fiesta, signora."

Assisi nodded uncertainly as Duo turned away. When Wufei glanced back, she was still standing in the doorway, twisting her shawl, her eyes fixed blindly on a spot in the hallway where Carver had stood.

Chapter End Notes
For those who don't know: *Bella Ciao* is an Italian resistance song of the partisans fighting the fascist armies. It's a bright, chirpy little ditty as long as you don't understand the words, which go something like this.

'Oh partisan, take me with you
O bella ciao, o bella ciao, o bella ciao ciao ciao,
Oh partisan, take me with you to fight,
For I am ready to die' (cue accordion)

and then the singer goes on to tell his 'Bella' just how he wants to be buried. Great song. Gotta love the Italians.
Chapter 17

"Will you and your government teach eagles to fly and tigers to hunt? Of course not. No one is so arrogant with nature. But you and your government want to tell me what to buy and how to live, and I am more complex than any eagle or tiger. Give me only the same respect you pay the badger and the blue jay, and leave me alone.

After all, anarchy means nothing more than human ecology."

---Allen Thornton, Laws of the Jungle

The kick punted the rusty tin can clear off the sidewalk and across the street to bounce off a nearby pylon. Duo scowled after it as if he wished he'd kicked it harder.

They were walking the distance from Vanzetti to Makhno instead of taking the shuttle. Duo said that he had a couple of people he wanted to talk to in an attempt to track down Herb Spasson, but Wufei gathered the main aim of the exercise was to let Duo blow off steam without too many witnesses.

"Shit, we're just not getting a break on this fucking case," Duo growled, ruffling up his bangs. "Another dead end."

"Spasson might be the one who ends up dead."

Duo shrugged. "Maybe, maybe not. Depends how friendly he is with Ferret-face. Maybe they're just hiding him."

"Until what?"

"Until Carver and Ferret leave the colony, I'm guessing. Or maybe Herb is just really, really stupid and followed Ferret and his big scary buddy all the way to recyc."

Duo's feet pounded the sidewalk as if he wanted to punish it. He mumbled another litany of curses like a mantra, then he glanced at Wufei.

"You're taking this better than I thought."

Wufei shrugged. He was angry and concerned too, but he'd grown somewhat inured to these kinds of setbacks in his time with the Preventers. An informant disappearing at a critical moment - and reappearing in a river with a brand new pair of concrete boots - was pretty much par for the course.

"At least we have a name and a face now, and a few more leads to follow," Duo muttered, turning a moody look back at the streets around them.

"How is that going to help?" Wufei had not been terribly impressed with their ability to find anybody in this chaotic colony to date.

"It helps a lot. We know who Herb is, and we know he lives in Haymarket. And we know he's such a good buddy of Ferret's that the latter went and got him out before we could ask him any questions. That says just how much Herb knows. We don't know who Ferret and Carver are, but we know Herb. He's traceable. Once we find him, he can tell us Ferret and Carver's names, and then we have
Duo suddenly grinned, feral and deadly, though when he spoke it was with a theatrical sigh. "I've been neglecting poor Scythe lately. Her pipes are getting a bit clogged, and I won't tell you what's lurking in the Zero-G toilet. I think my lil' beauty should be seen by a good plumber. Don't you? I know how to find one. We'll talk to a couple of people on our way back. And we'll stop by Chris's candy stand. I could do with some comfort."

"We don't have time for you to get stoned, Maxwell."

"Not stoned, buddy, just a bit merry. Give me that, right?"

Wufei didn't answer. At this point he almost felt like a bit of chemical comfort himself, the mild kind that Chris could provide. It was barely a temptation, in answer to the frustration and the gloom that lurked behind his control. He was never going to get out of Freeport at this rate.

They avoided the busier thoroughfares and stuck to deserted side streets and back alleys between repair hatches. They walked past hangars and workshops, a couple of old buildings that had developed faults and hadn't been repaired due to lack of time and resources, junkyards, grimy air filter units, trash everywhere and a good number of feral cats. Wufei's mood matched their surroundings, while Duo's improved steadily as they walked. The smuggler bounced back quickly, as always.

Wufei's thoughts kept wandering down strange avenues, as if getting lost in the dark and twisted streets. He glared reprovingly at a junkyard up ahead whose contents had burst their chicken-wire fence and spilled over into the road, but his rebellious thoughts refused to dwell on the disorder. As much as he tried to concentrate on Ferret's unexpected appearance and the chain of events that might link him to Carver, his mind kept drifting back to the riots on L2, to choices made, to the justice he wanted to apply now, to Freeport's chaos that just failed to blow up like it should, to a hand at his waist and a mouth near his own whispering Bella ciao, o Bella ciao, Bel-

"Wu? You okay?"

"I'm fine," Wufei lied automatically.

"You're awfully quiet."

"I don't feel the need to rant and curse over something we can't change," Wufei retorted, and hated the way he'd sounded completely stuck up.

"Really? I think it'd be good for your digestion," said Duo, unaffected by Wufei's pissy reply.

"What else am I supposed to do. Jump around like I'm being electrocuted and insult a noble art by calling it 'dancing'?"

"Whoa, someone don't like the scene."

"Do you dance?" Wufei challenged.

Blue eyes blinked innocently. "Why, Mr Chang, are you asking me out on a date?"

He laughed when Wufei spluttered a denial.

"They don't call it dancing, if that makes you feel any better," Duo added. "The kids call it 'smashing', or 'crashing' or something. It seems to change its name every ten years. And no. I never
got into the whole dance culture. Back on L2, I was either too young, too hungry, too poor, or too much of a terrorist. Now...nah."

"You looked like you were into it," Wufei pointed out, remembering Duo's grin and the unleashed energy in his step as he'd passed the pit.

"No. I spent too long fighting, I think," Duo answered, his gaze turning inward idly. "That pseudo 'I'm going wild now!' shit don't do much for Shinigami."

"Not unless you blew up the dance floor," Wufei muttered.

"Fuck, you still mad at that?" Duo made a show of massaging his temples to relieve a Wufei-begotten stress headache. "Come on, man, how else were we going to get into that holding bay? The whole lunar base was breathing down our necks, and I didn't hear you suggest running off and leaving your brand-new Altron behind for Tsubarov to find."

"You nearly blew us to hell, Maxwell."

"For guys like us, it would have been a bloody short trip, Chang. Did you want them to stick you back in that cell and switch off the O2 again? Shit, I think a bit of smashing would do you some good. You're wound up tighter than a C90 hauling cable trying to tug a barge. You've always been like that, even during the war: cold fish, cold fish, cold fish and then wham! Chang-shaped explosion. No fucking wonder Une made you take those anger management thingies, not that they did any visible good."

Wufei's boots rang harshly against the metal as he stopped abruptly.

Duo paused in his stride and glanced back. "Oops. Was Heero not supposed to tell me about that?"

"I would rather he hadn't," Wufei answered tightly, his furious gaze trying to ignite an oil slick at his feet.

"You know Heero. Social sensitivities of a buster rifle," Duo said. Wufei had the distant feeling that Duo regretted the jab now; the thought was lost in the embarrassment and anger eating at him. "If it makes you feel any better, Heero was totally on your side. He said he'd have done more to the little shit you attacked than squeeze his windpipe a bit," Duo sounded both hesitant to dig any further and way too curious not to.

"There were extenuating circumstances," Wufei answered shortly, starting to walk again as if he could physically move away from the conversation.

Duo shadowed him step for step. "Such as?"
"Does it matter?"

"Yeah, it does. If I ever feel the urge to strangle you a little bit, I'd like to know what kind of circumstances could extenuate that," Duo said in a reasonable tone of voice.

"Mind your own business, Maxwell. And you're free to try me any time."

"I'll remember that." Duo lengthened his stride to pull abreast of the Preventer. "But if you don't tell me, I'll just have to guess."

"Wh-"

"Did he make a pass at you? Spill your coffee? Pinch Sally? Steal your stapler? Step on your toe? Push-"

"He let a murderer get away!" Wufei snapped. He knew Duo was joking. He knew the bastard was only trying to get a rise out of him. But behind the joke, maybe Duo did think Wufei could lose his temper for so little, and that made the words come tumbling out, hot and angry.

"He misfiled-" the word nearly ignited under the heat of his sarcasm "-the testimony of a murder witness, because that witness was an influential man and the murder happened in a bondage-special cat-house. He said - when my hands were on his throat - that he didn't think it would matter because of course he expected us to tell the judge unofficially what had happened and the judge would behave as if he'd heard the testimony in court and override anything the defense had to say and send the murderer to a penal colony without having to sully the reputation of an important man who only happened to be a key witness." Wufei paused to take a needed breath, and realized his voice had been raised and that Duo had been making shushing motions for a few seconds now. Damn it. Good thing this area was mostly deserted.

"Anyway, Defense would have torn us to shreds in court," Wufei muttered. "We had to drop the case. The murderer walked."

"Let me guess." Duo's voice sounded amused, but there was steel in it. "This was on L2?"

"No, Tokyo."

"Really?" Duo looked surprised.

"We're colonists, that's what we think of first," Wufei pointed out tiredly. "But Romefeller and the Alliance had control of Earth for decades. Things have been working that way for years. It's all very genteel down there. Very well mannered. Rich people aren't bothered by-" Shut up, Chang. Shut up now, before you really let something slip.

Fortunately, Duo was more interested in Wufei's personal experience than politics. "So how come you got the slap on the wrist and the guy's not in the stockade?"

"No proof."

"What about what he told you?"

"For some strange reason, choking a confession out of a suspect is considered bad form in the Preventers."

"Didn't Heero back you up?"
"Heero?"

"Your partner? Christ, don't tell me you talked to this rat alone."

Of course Wufei had 'talked' to the man alone. If Heero had been there, that would have made things way too complicated for Trowa and Une.

"I...was alone. I...lost my temper and attacked him where there were no witnesses."

It felt wrong to lie to a friend. It felt worse somehow when it was Duo, who put such stock in not lying to start with. The words stuck in Wufei's throat, his mouth tried to clench round them.

"Hey, I would have lost my cool too," Duo told him kindly, obviously misinterpreting the reason for Wufei's reluctance.

Wufei grunted and started walking again. Maybe now they could forget about it.

"Sounds like you were the lucky one, not to land in the stockade," Duo commented, following him step for step once more.

"The man didn't press charges."

"Knowing he'd be even more on your shit-list if he did, I don't blame him," Duo said and snickered.

Wufei remembered the wide eyes that had gone from offended to frightened in less than three seconds. And then bulging a few second later. As always, there was some small satisfaction to be had from this kind of episode, whatever the circumstances and whatever the consequences.

"So Une sent you to the head-doctor instead of the stockade?"

"Can we change the subject?"

"No. I've never been to an anger management course, though I'm sure OZ would have been happy to pay me one. Spill. I'm curious." A sharp elbow nudged Wufei. "Come on, what was it like?"

"Boring. Humiliating. Stupid. Useless. Need any other adjectives?"

"Need details, man."

"Why?!"

"Because I'll drive you ape until I get them," Duo answered in a reasonable tone.

Wufei wondered if his ancestors were having fun at his expense in the Celestial Gardens. Or was this their punishment for the stain he'd put on the Chang family name?

"Look, it was just a gesture. Everybody who mattered in the hierarchy knew the truth, Une just had to satisfy the board of directors that I wasn't- that I'd get my stress under control. So they made me go see this young councilor on L5. Not a shrink, just someone to talk to."

"What? The kind who wants you to get in touch with your inner muffin or something?"

"Yes."

"That must have been rough," Duo said sympathetically, though his eyes were twinkling with amusement. "Especially if she was too young to serve in the war. Some of the kids these days, hell,
they're my age, but I feel like I could be their Dad."

"I don't think she saw me as a father figure. After two weeks, she threatened to quit if my case wasn't reassigned."

Duo's face twitched, but he kept up a good front of an attentive, considerate listener.

"Unfortunately that didn't look good on my file, so Une ordered me to see a shrink. I suppose she selected him because he was old and male and probably wouldn't burst into tears during the session."

"What did he say?"

"You're being tremendously indiscreet."

"You betcha. Come on, what did he say?"

"He started to ask me about my hobbies, particularly anything that would let me express myself." Since Duo was dragging this embarrassing episode out of him with pliers, let him hear it. Wufei was bleakly curious to see how long Duo would be able to keep that serious face and compassionate mien.

"I'm guessing he wasn't amused by the fact you unwind by practicing sword strokes," Duo prompted.

"I avoided telling him about that," Wufei said shortly. He'd never have involved Dr Deer in something so private. "Anyway, he was thinking along the lines of an artistic endeavor. He asked me if I could sing."

"How's that supposed to help you relax?" Duo looked puzzled. "It's never lowered my blood pressure."

"You sing?"

"In the shower, like everybody else. I sound like a gear that's been left out in space without sealant, but my volume makes up for that."

"I can well imagine. Do you draw?"

"Just design specs." Duo looked puzzled.

"Do you dance? Oh, you already answered that."

"...This guy actually wanted you to sing, draw or get down and boogie?" Duo's eyes were wide again and the corner of his mouth was twitching. "Where did you say this quack got his diploma?"

"I gave him the same answers you did," Wufei growled, ignoring the rhetorical question. "Can't dance, can't sing, can't draw, but I know twenty different ways of killing a man with my bare hands."

Duo hid his short snicker in a cough. "I bet that went down well."

"He said I needed an outlet for my aggression. I told him I had quite a few of them, they're called criminals."

Something like a whimper escaped Duo as he tried to keep the serious look on his face.

"He wasn't amused," Wufei understated. "He suggested that with my level of education, writing or
drawing would be a suitable means of expressing my feelings. I refused to write on the grounds that this could inadvertently divulge information on Preventer cases, so he asked me to try painting.

"And?" Duo managed to gasp out, his voice a little higher and wobblier than usual.

Wufei rolled his eyes, but at this point he had little dignity left in the matter.

"I drew some stuff so he wouldn't go whining to Une and get me suspended. When I showed it to him, he thought I was making fun of him."

"Were you?" Duo gulped.

"No, that was pretty much my best effort," Wufei admitted, feeling his cheeks flush.

Duo twitched.

"So, what did you do to get him off your case?" he asked, after clearing his throat twice.

"Calligraphy," Wufei muttered. "I learned the art when I was younger, before the war." He was so irritated at Dr Deer, Une, Trowa, Duo, everybody, that he did not feel graceful enough to acknowledge that he'd enjoyed rediscovering this small part of his past.

"That's the fancy letters, right? Chinese characters?"

"Yes."

"Did that help relax you?"

"I guess it did. I wrote the characters for Useless and Stupidity in a very nice composition, and that made him happy."

Duo choked.

"Then I composed a small poem in reference to his ancestry and their relationship to canines," Wufei finished sadistically, watching the smuggler's façade crumble. "He liked that one so much he asked me if he could hang it in his office. That helped my anger levels to no end."

Duo squeaked an apology or something and burst out laughing. He was shaking so hard he had to lean against a big piece of piping at the edge of the junkyard.

Wufei glared at the bent neck before him for appearance's sake. Inwardly he wondered why Duo's laughter was somehow less embarrassing than Heero and Trowa's quiet understanding. Maybe it was because Heero and Trowa, despite their support, didn't really understand how much the whole episode had offended and humiliated him. Duo would have packed the shrink's desk with semtex by day two.

"Oh man, what a quack! I can't believe Une asked you to see him," Duo finally spluttered between gasps for air.

"To be honest, his advice was more constructive than the counselor's."

"Oh, what did she say?"

"She told me to watch more television," Wufei ground out. That had been on the very first day. Things had gone rapidly downhill after that.
"Come again?" Duo wiped his eyes and focused on him.

"Television. She said I'd find it soothing."

"The lil' crumpet sounds even dumber than the old guy. What's soothing about the tube?"

"She thinks it is. Most people do," Wufei muttered.

"Really? I find it boring. Hilde has it on all day when I go see her. She won't even let me put on the sports channels," Duo added petulantly.

"It tells them they're at peace." Wufei could normally spit those words out with venom; today he could only manage tired and numb. "After decades of war and loss, it tells them everything is okay, that the riots are all just isolated pockets of looting, that the economy is getting better all the time and that Relena's wearing a new dress to the Luxemburg grand ball."

"Yeah, boring." Duo heaved a great sigh, with an extra chuckle leaking through it, and lounged back against the pipe. He cocked his head and scrutinized Wufei. The latter found himself shifting under the direct gaze, as if all the moments he'd stood on the outside, feeling isolated from the universal Peace, were something sinful he should hide.

Then Duo swung around, jumped and stood up on the pipe in one fluid movement, black coat swinging like a curtain opening. Just as Wufei was about to ask his friend if he'd blown a fuse, Duo threw back his head and hollered.

"Maaaarx!"

Wufei distinctly felt his jaw thump his breastbone.

"Marx! You thought religion was the opium of the people?!" Duo shouted at the top of his lungs. "You didn't know what TV was, you poor fuck, you!"

A dog barked in the distance. There was the sound of a window opening abruptly nearby.

"Relena could wear a uniform, jackboots and a rose lapel as long as she made it look good on screen!" Duo shouted. "Fuck 'em all!"

A head poked out of a window in a distant building. Duo waved, and the person went back inside. Somebody behind a tall wall a block away shouted 'hear hear!' The echoes chased Duo's voice around the sector until it faded like the noise of a distant mob cheering.

Wufei was staring around, aghast, waiting for somebody to berate them. When he glanced back at Duo, he was pinned by a challenging stare.

"You ever do that, Wufei?"

"D-do what?"

"This."

Duo threw back his head, his arms-

"AAAAAAAAH!"

It wasn't a word. It was just a primal scream, free and splendid in its sheer brutality.
Wufei shuddered but said nothing, reduced to silence by the shout, the way it bounced freely back and forth through Freeport's metal streets.

Other windows opened, but apart from a distant shout of 'shut the fuck up', nobody protested. Another dog barked, a small excited yip-yip-yip. Its cries were buried by the groan of a train passing overhead.

Duo hopped off the pipe and landed in front of him. Wufei faced a stare that was part challenge, part understanding. As if Duo could see every squirming little doubt, every angry word buried in Wufei's soul. As if he could count the names on Wufei's list, and knew how much it cost the Preventer not to act on it.

Wufei was left staring at the pipe as the black-coated figure moved abruptly aside. He could feel Duo's eyes drill into his head, an invitation or a dare, or maybe both. Wufei took a step back instinctively, mortified at the very thought of exhibiting himself in that way. He was in control of himself, he wasn't some savage to put on such a display-

"Come on, let's go home."

Wufei's eyes stayed fixed on the pipe, even when Duo's boots began to move. He felt almost... though there was no reason for him to feel ashamed, he amended harshly before the thought had even formed. He'd not been the one making a spectacle of himself, he-

Duo's hand landed on his shoulder, giving him a shove in the right direction. Wufei growled something indistinct, his head down. The hand stayed on his shoulder a couple more seconds longer than needed, and gave a slight squeeze before falling back to its owner's side.

By the time they made it back to Makhno, the moment was well over and conversation had resumed. Duo had made enquiries about Herb with a few friends, and also bought a couple of bright pink pills at Chris's stand. He'd offered one to Wufei with a twinkle in his eye that indicated he was doing this just to start a good verbal match, and he wasn't disappointed.

"What's the difference between taking a mild booster and swinging a sword like a maniac for two hours to get an endorphin boost?" Duo asked, lowering his voice as they passed Babka's door.
"You're monkeying with your chemistry either way."

"Exercising is good for you, and the endorphins are a natural body response-"

"To stress!" Duo shot back, unlocking his front door absently. "Are you saying-"

Duo stepped into the room and froze. His stiletto instantly shot its sheath and nestled in his palm.

Wufei's sword was drawn as soon as he'd heard the twang of the dagger's spring. He eyed the man sitting at Duo's workbench, casually going over an old tech manual Duo had left lying about.

The silence was absolute apart from the voices of children yelling outside and the gentle leafing noises as the stranger flipped a few pages.

Duo's eyes flickered around the room, resting briefly on the back door which showed no more signs
of a forced entry than the front one.
"What are you doing here?" he asked, finally bringing his attention back to the intruder.

The man looked up as if he'd only now noticed their presence. "What?" His voice was raspy and sounded oddly amused. "Not even a 'hello'?'"

"Hello, Ravachol. What are you doing here?"
Chapter 18

L'ennemi était chez moi
On m'a dit résigne-toi
Mais je n'ai pas pu
J'ai repris mon arme...

Hier encore nous étions trois
Il ne reste plus que moi
Et je tourne en rond
Dans la prison des frontières.

Le vent souffle sur les tombes
La liberté reviendra
On nous oubliera
Nous rentrerons dans l'ombre

(The enemy was in my country
I was told to accept it
But I couldn't
I took up my weapon again...

There were three of us yesterday
I am now the only one left
And I pace
Within the prison of the borders

The wind blows across the graves
Freedom will come again
We will be forgotten
We will return to the shadows.)

---La Complainte Du Partisan, Emmanuel d'Astier de La Vigerie, code-named "Bernard" by the French Résistance, London, 1943
The song is also known as 'The Partisan', in an English version by Leonard Cohen

(Note: Translation is my own, and not that sung by Cohen and Baez. The last verse was completely changed in the English version, which made the song into a song of triumph. The original French version is grimmer.)

Ravachol, the shadowy kingpin whose men had presumably smuggled Carver out of L2, was sitting at Duo's workbench as if this was where he spent most of his leisure time. Wufei, abruptly plunged into the calm of battle, divided his attention between the apparently unthreatening drug lord and the rest of the room. Surely the man wasn't here alone. Mako and a few dozen thugs were undoubtedly hiding out in the yard.

"I apologize for making myself at home, but I wasn't sure when you'd be back," said Ravachol,
flipping to the next page of the borrowed tech manual and pouring over the use of alternators in engine blocks. "I'd have waited for you on the doorstep, but I tire easily."

"How did you get in?"

Ravachol eyes flickered up at Duo and he smiled. It was not a pleasant expression on his worn face.

"What do you want?" Duo asked, voice neutral.

"Why Duo, you don't look happy to see me." Ravachol cocked his head to one side and examined the smuggler.

"Your man Mako tried to hustle my Blade."

"Ah yes. Your Blade." The gravelly voice picked the word apart.

Wufei met and matched Ravachol's scrutiny. The man could get Wufei lynched with one well-placed word, but the warrior wasn't going to cringe before the likes of a dealer.

Ravachol brazenly examined Wufei from top to toe with an offensive curl of the lip. It was pretty clear to Wufei that Ravachol knew who he was and what he was doing here. What wasn't clear at all was what he intended to do about it. There was no noise from the yard outside; Mako might be quiet enough to hide there, but there wasn't a small army with him. And something in Ravachol's demeanor told Wufei that there wasn't even Mako out there to insure his safety. Ravachol was alone. In view of what the man knew of Wufei and Duo, that would take a certain amount of courage and self-confidence, the Preventer reluctantly conceded. Ravachol was obviously in no shape to fight anybody.

Though the man was in his mid-thirties, he sat like someone twice his age. His skin was sallow, the yellow of jaundice. It tainted the white of his eyes, the crescents in his ruined fingernails, his gums when he spoke. His face was a yellow skull, paper-thin skin stretched over bone. His hair was as black as Wufei's, but it was ragged, wispy and brittle. It could be the result of disease, but Wufei had also noticed the man's hands; gnarled, the fingers crooked, the skin reddened and rough in some places. That wasn't the ravages of age. There was a vivid, puckered scar in the palm of one of them as if something had been hammered through it at some point, and the fingernails were thick, warped and grey. When nails were torn out at the root, they never grew back quite the same.

At odds with his ruined body, Ravachol's eyes were as sharp as daggers, and they held Wufei's gaze with considerable hostility and not the slightest concession of weakness.

Finally Ravachol broke off the eye-to-eye battle and swiveled in his chair to talk to Duo.

"I hear you've been trying to get in touch with one of my mooncursers. I'm sorry if Mako put you off negotiations with Darbois. His actions had nothing to do with you."

That distinction hung in the air like the smell of a corpse until Duo said, "Wufei is my Blade and my friend. Anything to do with him has to do with me."

Ravachol's lips twisted downwards. "I see." He sounded honestly regretful, though not as much as Wufei, who was now seriously worried that not only was his cover blown, he was dragging Duo down with him.

"So...was there anything I could help you with?" That veneer of insincere civility was back. "Since Darbois left on his out-of-colony trip, maybe I can help you. Who exactly are you looking for?"
"I told Darbois what I wanted, and others before him. I can't believe you've not heard about it."
Duo's fingers had tightened on the dagger he still carried. The turn of Ravachol's last sentence had not been lost on Wufei either. When Duo had contacted Ravachol's freetraders, he'd only talked about a weapons run to the Nines; he'd concealed the fact he was looking for a particular ship and crew.

Ravachol and Duo stared at one another for a few long seconds, an unspoken challenge to see who would put the charade aside first. Then Ravachol's eyes flickered to Wufei again. He crossed his arms brusquely over his boney chest, visibly annoyed. He was dressed in warm slacks, vest and coat, well-cut and elegant clothes that suited his height but not his girth. His wasted body looked lost in them.

"You were chasing someone in Kropotkin the other day, I heard." His voice had hardened.

"Not chasing, really. Just curious about something. I'm a concerned citizen," Duo answered.

"Yes, but not of that sector. Though I understand you have a lot of friends there."

"Yeah, I do have a few buddies that hail from that area," Duo said brazenly. Wufei wished he could let that reassure him, but though Duo's support in Freeport was strong, a lot of it would evaporate with only a few well-chosen words by Ravachol to the wrong people.

"And this guy you were chasing- sorry, that you were curious about, was he one of them?" said Ravachol with only the thinnest pretense of unconcern left.

"No, not really."

"Did he maybe have something to do with the man who was murdered in Kropotkin the other day?"

"Why would you think that?" Duo's mobile face a picture of innocent curiosity.

"You were both in that neighborhood."

"So were a lot of people."

"I see," said Ravachol as if Duo had confided in him.
He unfolded himself stiffly from the swivel chair. He was five foot nine, though he probably weighed less than Wufei.

"I'm not here to chat, though it's been pleasant catching up with you. I'm here to discuss that trade route to the Nines you said you wanted to set up."

"Yeah?" Duo's chin dropped, visibly surprised at the sudden turn of the conversation, bangs shadowing his eyes as he examined Ravachol.

"I wouldn't if I were you," Ravachol stated baldly. "I've been doing a lot of business in the Nines these last five years. I have developed quite a nose for trouble. My instincts tell me that your client is a risk. I would steer well clear of him if I were you."

"Is that a fact?" Duo rubbed his nose. "You don't even know who my client is."

"Oh, I have a fairly good idea, Duo, I have a fairly good idea," said Ravachol, glancing at Wufei. "Remember where your allegiances are, freetrader."

"I'm not sure what you mean, Rav, but I think I've just been insulted," said Duo with a steel-hard
Ravachol looked at him in silence, then he walked over to Duo. Wufei's fingers tightened on his sword and he stepped up to stand by Duo's side. There could be a weapon or two hidden beneath that over-sized coat.

Up close, Ravachol smelled of expensive cologne and the stale, musty scent of sickness. Sunken eyes held Duo's as the drug lord stopped a few feet away, looking down at the smaller smuggler.

"I'm just saying this as a friend, Duo," he finally said. His hoarse voice was suddenly gentle.

Duo turned his face away, an abrupt movement that looked like a flinch. His mouth moved. The grin took a second to form and it was a caricature of the usual smirk.

"Sorry, Rav, a drug dealer is no friend of mine."

Ravachol smiled. It was surprisingly sincere. "I know. You're a stubborn, sneaky little bastard, Duo Maxwell, but you always stayed remarkably true to yourself. You could teach many a man twice your age a thing or two about principles. I'm wasting my breath, I know, but take care, and do try to stay out of trouble."

Duo's eyes stayed fixed on the far corner of the room.

Ravachol took a step towards the door and stopped to look at Wufei. The latter never regretted the no-communication rule more than now. He met Ravachol's hostile glare and surpassed it. He hoped his stance was as unequivocal as he'd want his words to be. This criminal could keep his threats! If he touched even one hair of that ridiculously long braid, Wufei would find him and make him pay if it took him a lifetime to do so.

Ravachol unexpectedly laughed, a wheezy chuckle that relaxed the ruined lines of his face and showed a faint ghost of the man he might have otherwise been.

"Hah, Mako warned me that you seemed particularly protective of one another. I wish..." Ravachol sighed. "I wish we could have met five years ago and in better circumstances. I think we'd have had more to talk about back then. May your stay in Freeport be safe, pilot. And short."

With those last two dire words tossed over his shoulder, Ravachol made his way to the door and let himself out.

Wufei was silent for a while, digesting that. Duo had turned around to rest his elbows on the kitchen counter. Wufei had a lot to consider, but he found his gaze dragged to the taut line of Duo's neck. The smuggler's hands were balled into fists. His face was turned so Wufei couldn't see it. The latter felt torn between the urge to turn away and leave Duo to battle this out privately, and a strange compulsion to walk up to his friend and- and shake him or-...something. This tension on Duo's normally relaxed frame just didn't look right.

Wufei realized he'd compromised by staying where he was and staring at Duo's right ear, which really wasn't helping anybody. He shook his head abruptly and turned towards his bedroll and bag.

"I should leave."

"Like hell," Duo growled behind him.

"You heard him. He knows who I am. Duo, he threatened you directly."
"Yeah, like that's never happened before." Duo turned around to give Wufei a pugnacious glare loaded with all the stubbornness Ravachol had commented on. "Forget it, Chang. Duo Maxwell's no quitter. It's not so much that Carver's a hitman. Hell, Heero did some of that too in his time. I could let that pass. But Carver ex-ed a guy here in Freeport. On the sly! This is my home, dude. I don't let people like Carver do things like that."

"How about people like Ravachol?" Wufei asked neutrally. "I think this visit makes Carver and Ravachol associates at the very least. We might end up going against Ravachol directly."

Duo glared moodily at the floor instead of answering.

Wufei looked weighingly at his stack of clothes on a low shelf and the pack near his feet, then at the door through which the ruined man had passed.

"Who did that to him? OZ?" he finally asked.

"The Romefeller and OZ alliance, before Treize came back," Duo answered after a moment of silence that had Wufei wondering if he would answer at all.

"I remember you mentioning he was a rebel fighter."

"Yeah. Yeah, he was. But not your kind. He's right, five years ago you two would have had a lot to talk about. You'd have argued like a Mother Matron and a ho."

"What do you mean?" Wufei wasn't particularly curious about Ravachol's past, apart from anything that might relate to the case, but the sharp angle in Duo's shoulders was something he still wanted to reach out and touch whichever way he could.

Duo stared blankly at his dinky kitchen cabinet, then he hoisted himself up onto the counter.

"Rav was something of a legend in the cesspit where I grew up. He's been a rebel since he was old enough to throw a stone. His dad was a schoolteacher on an L2 industrial colony. Dunno why, but most revolutionaries I read about in quarantine had a mom or dad who's a schoolteacher."

"Somebody should do a study," Wufei concurred ironically, knowing it would feed the flow rather than break it. Duo was like that, Wufei had learned this past month; he needed the appearance of a conversation even during a monologue.

"The usual shit happened. Dad was arrested for trying to help organize a local factory union and got 'disappeared', while Mom died soon after during the very first plague. Rav turned to anarchy like some guys enter the church." Duo chuckled, a sound devoid of any humor.

"Is that why he and I would argue?" Wufei asked dryly.

"No. Well, okay, that's one reason. The other is, Rav knows no rules when he fights. No rules."

Duo's legs, crossed at the ankle, started to swing up and down, his eyes fixed on the motion.

"He has no honor?"

"Define honor. His aim was to get Earthers outta space, all means acceptable. Terrorism, riots, sabotage, piracy. He was running drugs and weapons back when you and I were too small to reach a Gundam's control stick. That's how I met him, when he was smuggling shells with the Sweepers. You should have heard the man talk back then, he was amazing...He never touched a penny of the money he made off shit and hardware, it all went to the resistance. He told Howard once he hated dealing, but it was the only way he'd found to finance the fight."
"The end justifies the means," said Wufei, his voice colored with distaste.

"Don't get on your high horse," Duo snapped. The legs swung more and more violently. "We looked nice in our shiny suits attacking only military targets, but Rav didn't have that option. More to the point, we almost lost! Like, dozens of times! We barely survived the year, and if we did, it was in part because Treize and Lady Psycho had their own agenda, not because of any smart moves on our part. We should be dead and our cause completely fucked over. And then it wouldn't have mattered a rat's arsehole how noble and honorable we stayed. Ravachol fought for over ten years and made sure that L2 and L3 were never fully under Alliance control, and still had the will and means to fight back. So who's the hero here?"

"I cannot answer that question for you," said Wufei. He'd leaned against the wall and severely crossed his arms, a familiar position for a familiar frame of mind. "But I know that nothing good can come from compromising your own principles. Your cause is corrupt before you fire the first bullet."

"Must be nice to have Gundanium-plated certitudes like that," said Duo, kicking viciously at the air. "Are you saying you agree with his methods?"

The legs stopped abruptly in mid-swing. An odd sort of calm came over Duo's face. For an instant, the deeper currents that moved Duo Maxwell were visible; darkness and light, blending; strength, faith and callous determination. Wufei remembered the way Shinigami had laughed when he was at Deathscythe's controls...the glimpse into Duo's inner workings was both frightening and fascinating. Wufei wasn't sure he wanted to look, but found himself compelled to. He almost retracted the question, but Duo was already speaking in a matter-of-fact voice, and the moment was over.

"I don't do philosophy, Chang. All I know is that when it came down to the original plan for Operation Meteor, I went one way. Rav would probably have gone the other. That's the difference between us."

Duo contemplated his legs that were now dangling quietly from the edge of the counter.

"For ten years, Ravachol fought any way he could," he continued softly. "The colonies didn't support him openly, but they were getting raped by the Alliance, so they were happy to see the rebels screw them over in turn. Then White Fang seceded while Oz and Romefeller were fighting each other. Suddenly it looked like the colonies had a chance. They might actually get rid of the Earthers. Rav was one of the rebellion leaders by then. He harassed Romefeller troops, guerrilla-style, he spied for the White Fang, he blew up communication satellites and weapons depots, all that. He was this close to freeing the colonies..." Duo's fingers pinched a quarter inch of air before he let his hand fall back to the counter. "So they sold him out to Romefeller."

"What?!" Wufei asked, startled.

Duo smiled cynically. "Ravachol's an anarchist. Has been since he threw his first Molotov. If the Fang and the colonies had won with the help of Rav and his troops, he'd have had a lot of influence. And that didn't go down well with some people. The colonies were lead by a bunch of rich families - like the Winners. They didn't want to give up their control, they just wanted to stop paying taxes to Earth to fund their dirt-side wars. But anarchy? You got to be kidding.

"So once the Fang got a good head start and they didn't need him anymore, those gents sold Rav out. They gave his location to a Romefeller taskforce and stood back. I hear the colony leaders even made it out as a gesture of good faith towards Romefeller. They were 'renouncing base terrorism'. They'd already taken a step back from White Fang. And they certainly turned on us when the heat was on. If Romefeller had won the war, the colonies would still be under Earther control, but at least
they'd look innocent of any open act of aggression. Nice, huh?"

"Not really, no." The student of history and politics Wufei had once been knew this happened in every war, every revolution. That didn't mean the warrior had to like it.

"Romefeller held Ravachol for a month before the Libra went down. They thought he might know White Fang's ultimate plans. Which he didn't, of course. Ravachol's pretty ruthless, but he's not apeshit like Marquise. That crazy Earther had a bee in his blond bonnet, but any true spacer knows that the colonies can't survive if the home planet gets blitzed."

Duo was staring blindly at the door out of the room.

"They tortured him. He told them nothing. They shot him so full of drugs, his kidneys and liver got damaged, but he still didn't talk. They threatened to execute hostages; he tried to hang himself with the IV feed they'd put in his arm to keep him alive...Then we did a number on Libra, Mizz Peacecraft made her Peace and Love speech, and it turned out nobody had won, neither Earth nor White Fang. So Romefeller kicked Ravachol out of jail and left him to die in the gutter."

The words had dampened the weak light coming from the workbench which Ravachol had turned on before flipping through the tech manual with his ruined hands.

Wufei stayed silent. He'd been prepared to die like that himself. He felt no pity for Ravachol. Neither did he agree with the man's methods. But the darkness nibbled at the edge of his vision, the inky depression that had dragged him down after he'd failed to kill Treize, or after he'd killed Treize but failed to kill the idea of the man. A depression that threatened to grip him on a regular basis these days. It seemed that sometimes, even if you did everything that you thought was right, you still ended up in the wrong, and the entire universe buried you in it. It was something that Wufei knew all too well.

"I don't know how he survived," Duo continued, stretching and rubbing the back of his neck under the braid. "He turned up six months later in Freeport with Mako and a few other scary guys in tow. They picked up some of the drug routes he'd set up before, and he's not left the colony since. I don't know what makes him tick these days. Maybe he's still fighting, still gathering money and weapons for some great revolution. Maybe he's just going through the motions, selling drugs to kids because when their parents bury them, he'll have gotten a bit of his own back. I don't know. I do know that if Ravachol's behind Josh's murder and playing cozy with Carver and Ferret, then I have no problems taking them all down, since that's the question you weren't going to ask me directly."

"I-"

"After all, it won't be the first time Ravachol got screwed over by someone he thought was on his side." Duo jumped off the counter. "I'm going to wheedle some soba from Kimura over in Volt. If I have to eat that shit the commissary dishes out one more time, I'll puke."

The door closed with a firm thump before Wufei could mention security measures, ambushes and murder.

He stayed leaning against the wall for a long time. The reasonable side of him was insisting he follow Duo, but he wouldn't. He glanced down at his backpack instead.

He should go. He was a source of danger to his ally...But he wasn't going to abandon his mission, and he wasn't going to run while Duo was in danger.

Duo's words had been meant as an explanation, almost an apology for the bitter, twisted existence of
a man Duo had once admired. To Wufei, they only illustrated what a dangerous creature they were dealing with. He knew the kind. He knew it because he'd seen the darkness in Ravachol's eyes when he'd looked in the mirror after killing Treize. This was a man who'd lost even the tenuous justification of a cause, but who was too strong - or too weak - to give up and let go of the fight. He could do anything. To Duo. The only way Wufei would have left was if he could have been sure to track down Carver another way, and if Duo left with him.

Why had Ravachol even come here? On the surface, it was simply to talk Duo out of digging any deeper. But there was more. Ravachol had wanted something. Was he trying to determine how much Duo and Wufei knew? Was that why he'd asked about Ferret?

No matter; they'd figure it out soon enough. They'd have to. Wufei gathered that Ravachol was wary of Duo's many friends. They would look into the L2 pilot's death most carefully. That would be why Ravachol had shown up solo instead of Mako and a dozen thugs. Wufei wasn't sure how much that protection was worth. He wasn't about to leave Duo in this pit alone with only that intangible armor to protect him. Wufei jerked away from the wall, gave his backpack a moody kick and went to check the back yard, not that he expected to find anything. Looked like they were going to spend the evening upgrading security while trying to figure out how Ferret, Carver and Ravachol all fit together.

Beyond that, he knew what he had to do. He had to help Duo find a link between Ravachol and Joshua's murder. Freeport had no laws, but it certainly had rules. If Wufei and Duo could prove that Ravachol and Carver were involved in a crime of that magnitude, then Freeport would do Wufei's justice for him. The Preventer might disapprove of vigilantism, but deep inside, past the constraints of the Law and the social contract, Wufei thought he'd rather like to see that sort of Justice applied. There was a rigorous symmetry that appealed to him. Ravachol and Carver had broken the unwritten laws of the colony that protected them. They should pay the price.
Chapter 19

That November night,
Looking up into the sky
You said "Hey, wish that was me up there
It's the biggest rocket I could find
And it's holding the night in its arms
If only for a moment
I can't see the look in its eyes
But I'm sure it must be laughing."

But it seemed to me
The saddest thing I'd ever seen
And I thought you were crazy
Wishing such a thing
I saw only a stick on fire
Alone, on its journey
Home to the quickening ground
With no one there to catch it
---Kate Bush, 'Rocket Tails'

Duo really was an adrenaline junkie.

That was the only logical conclusion Wufei could come to. Ravachol's menacing visit got the indomitable smuggler down for exactly the length of time it took him to go to Volt and come back again with a bowl of noodles. And it wasn't the danger that had dampened Duo's mood, merely the knowledge that he would now be going up against a man he'd once admired. But if the certainty that he now had a very powerful enemy who virtually held their lives in his hands bothered Duo at all, Wufei didn't see a hint of it, and he considered himself fairly adept at reading Duo's mood by now.

Maxwell just seemed to go out of his way to make things challenging for himself. They almost stopped using the train to get around after Ravachol's visit; instead they walked the back alleys and maintenance tunnels as if inviting an attack by Mako and the rest of Ravachol's goons. Duo still pushed the investigation forward, despite Wufei's heavy misgivings, confronting crooks and pirates to find out more about Ferret, Carver and Herb's whereabouts.

And he never told a lie. He twisted the truth into some interesting geometrical shapes on occasion, but it was never an outright lie. Considering Duo's job as a rat-catcher, that kind of limitation went beyond challenging and right into the realm of suicidal, in Wufei's opinion.

Wufei cared little about other people and their self-imposed burdens, but in Duo's case he found himself grappling with feelings of curiosity as much as concern. Maxwell seemed to be such a strange blend of constructive and destructive. He put so much energy into maintaining what you might almost call order in Freeport, just so that the colony would survive and the chaos endure. And that 'never tell a lie' thing...What could push a proclaimed survivalist like Duo, born and raised in a slum, an outcast on the edge of society, to take such a harsh vow, worthy of Confucius?
Wufei kept his curiosity rigorously in check. One did not poke around idly in the past and motivations of men such as themselves. Besides, Duo's secrets gave Wufei a moral excuse to keep his own. Well, something like a moral excuse. It was getting difficult though...it was easier to distract himself with speculations regarding Duo's character than dwell on how his friend saw him, Wufei, and how Duo would react if he ever learned the truth behind Wufei's mission here.

Wufei put a quick hand on Duo's shoulder as his ears picked up noises from the floor below. Duo's picks stayed poised an inch from Herb's lock, his head cocked to one side to catch whatever it was that Wufei had heard. The distant sound became the slow shuffle of tired feet coming up the stairs behind them.

The elderly man turned down the short hallway and stared at them in surprise. His eyes flickered from Duo - whose picks had disappeared instantaneously - to Herb Spasson's door.

"Can I help you, citizens?" he asked a little warily.

"I'm looking for Herb," Duo answered with one of his easy harmless smiles.

"Haven't seen Spasson for three days. I think he's with his woman," the man grunted. He moved towards the door next to Spasson's and fitted the key in the lock.

"He's not with Agostina," Duo said before the door could open. "He wasn't there to take her to Vanzetti's free day, and nobody's seen him since as far as I can tell. She's worried."

"Huh?" The man hesitated and turned to them once more to examine Duo carefully. "I've never seen you here before."

"I'm not a friend of Herb's. I only met him once," Duo answered steadily and of course with his own special blend of truth. "But I like Agostina, and she's afraid he's in trouble. I'd like to tell her Herb is okay, if I can."

"Oh. Well, not much I can tell you...what's your name?"

"Maxwell."

"It's like I told you, Maxwell, Herb's not been here for three days. Maybe he's seeing another bird on the sly. A friend of his showed up yesterday to pick up a few things and said Herb was going to shack up with a broad. That's why I thought he was with his woman."

"A friend? You sure it was a friend of his?"

The neighbor's old eyes glinted cantankerously. "I wouldn't have let him waltz into Herb's room and take his stuff otherwise. It was a buddy of Herb's from back when we were all in the underground resistance. That's mostly who all of Herb's friends are. Say..."

The elderly man stared at Duo, then his eyes flicked towards the tell-tale braid. "Maxwell? As in-you're that Maxwell?!"

"Well, I don't know. Which Maxwell are we talking about?" said Duo with overly innocent dimples
in his cheeks.

The old man nodded sharply and drew himself up straight. "Right. My name's Alex Fenton, by the way. The guy who came for Herb's stuff was Kor. Cedric Kor. He lives in Haymarket too, about five blocks from here. Ex-L2 resistance."

"Big guy? Rather fat? I've heard of him."

"Not all of Herb's friends are like that," Fenton interjected, which told Wufei volumes about Cedric Kor's character.

"Really? As I said, I only met Spasson once. What kind of guy is he?" Duo asked, leaning his back against the corridor wall.

Fenton weighed Duo and his question carefully. Then he shrugged, probably judging the subject harmless.

"Herb's got a...history, you could say. I've known him for three years, since he moved into this building. We help each other out. Haymarket can be tough. Not many luxuries here."

"That's a shame. It's always nice to have something to brighten your day." Duo smiled. Wufei, who was starting to know the man well by now, saw it as both sincere and calculating, one of those contradictions Duo mastered effortlessly. "Do you know Chris's Candy Cart?"

"Over in Volt? Yeah. Not well enough to stop there, though. He don't know me from Adam."

Fenton was looking at Duo with cautious hope in his eyes.

"Next time you see her, tell Chris that Duo Maxwell recommended her wares. I'm sure she can spare a few things to help lighten the load."

Fenton hesitated, staring right at Duo. He was silent for a spell, judging the conciliatory offer and the man who'd made it with the usual Freeport directness. Then he nodded towards his door. "Come on in. No point talking in the hallway."

Duo settled down a minute later on a worn couch, while Fenton perched on one of a pair of disparate bar stools at the kitchen counter. Wufei chose to stand near the door, out of Fenton's line of sight, as he felt that his looming presence was making the old man a bit nervous.

"So what kind of history does Herb have?" Duo asked in a serious voice. "I'm starting to think it might've caught up with him."

"I'm wondering if you're not right," said Fenton, his mouth turning down at the corners. "But if he's not with Agostina, then I don't know where he is. She's good for him, that woman. They've been together for over a year now, and she makes sure he stays on the straight and narrow. But you know, men like Herb and me...it's not easy. It's not easy to work day in day out like dogs when we used to take what we wanted from the Alliance. Don't get me wrong. Being in the underground was dangerous. I had two siblings, one older, one younger. Both dead."

Duo nodded sympathetically.

"But we could do something." Hands thickened by labor twitched in frustration against factory worker's pants. "It was...fast. You shot your way in, you took, you made them pay for your family and your buddies, you ran away and you hid out with the spoils. It's all different now, and sometimes things just seem too slow. Too huge, like we'll never get anywhere, ever. Shit, I'm not making sense. You probably don't get what I'm saying. Agostina never did..."
Fenton paused. Duo's eyes had turned inward and there was a strange smile on his lips.

"What am I sayin'," Fenton said with a rusty chuckle. "Of course you know, you were one of us. I mean, no offence, you weren't small time like-"

"I was one of you," said Duo, his eyes focusing and his grin wickedly amused. "I was one of you long before I got my hands on something a bit bigger than a gun."

"Right!" Fenton's smile was completely open now, and his old eyes gleamed with something like a fever. His hands rubbed at the rough protective clothing he wore. From the charred, whitened stains on his thighs and the acrid smell slowly filling the room, it appeared that Fenton now worked in a factory, probably with acids. Wufei tried not to think of an old ex-rebel getting antsy in a room full of dangerous chemicals.

"So Herb's fallen in with a rough crowd from his past, is that what you're saying? Terrorists? Gun runners?"

"I don't know exactly what they're into," Fenton sighed, coming down from his memories. "I try to keep away from all that. The tone of his words didn't imply fear or disapproval; he sounded more like a man staying away from a temptation because his doctor had told him it was bad for his health. "Herb didn't run with that crowd either. I don't want you to get that idea," Fenton added. "He was trained as an industrial plumber before the Alliance closed down the works on L2-X482 and turned it into a military depot. That's what he does now, he works as a plumber, does his shifts in the shipyards and factories. But his friends...I don't know what they're into. Herb doesn't actually do any business for them, but he's friends with them. They remind him of the old days, when we belonged. So sometimes he puts people up in his room if they've got to lie low a couple of days, or he holds packages for them, or gets in touch with people outside to pass messages. Small shit like that, you know?"

"Hey, it ain't against the law," said Duo. Fenton joined in the ensuing snicker. Wufei had heard people say that before and gathered by now that this was some sort of Freeport in-joke.

"It's not anything to get him into deep shit. Herb didn't want to join a gang. He just didn't want to say no to his ex-war buddies. I know the feeling. I'd do the same thing, but all the guys in my cell are dead. Except for a couple who went over to the Pigs." Fenton made a spitting noise.

"Yeah, it sucks when your pals go Lawboy on ya," Duo agreed. Wufei, out of Fenton's line of sight, glared in response to the small smirk tossed his way.

Duo got a few names of Herb's friends from Fenton. Most of them were ex-rebels, hotheaded elements that formed small gangs, worked with pirates and thieves, fenced and dealt in the colonies, and occasionally wandered out of their sector to have fights with similar gangs from the OZ and Alliance side.

One of these people had apparently been small with a face like a rodent. Fenton thought his first name was Albert and that he used to be a rebel from L3. The old man hadn't seen Albert for a few years, except briefly. The small man no longer hung out as much with the other ex rebs. Fenton had gotten the impression from Herb that that was because Albert was involved with something big on the outside. He knew nothing more than that.
Duo swore a lot, especially when they hit yet another dead end in their search for Ferret and Carver. But it was when he was working as a mechanic that he let rip the greatest profanities. He still spent all his off hours outside of the mission sweating over pieces of junk, some of them systems so outdated that Wufei had never seen their like before. Most of them were in pitiful state. Monique Desjean somehow expected Duo to repair them, perhaps by a laying of hands and a prayer. Duo would complain like hell, but he would also buckle down without the slightest hesitation, sacrificing hours of sleep, eating with his damaged right hand while his left turned a screw or browsed historical archives for wiring instructions.

Wufei could tell how the repairs were going according to how dire and elaborate the swearing became. The cursing frequently involved the Christian religion Duo professed to no longer believe in. When he let loose a particularly sacrilegious blasphemy, Duo would glance briefly upwards and mouth something inaudible. A couple of times Wufei was at an angle from which he could read Duo's lips. The words were 'sorry Father'. Wufei had not thought the street orphan knew his father, and he was pretty sure the man didn't live near the hub of Freeport, where Duo's glance was aimed.

He didn't ask any questions.

"Basil, you rotting heap of shit, you led us quite a chase and I'm right out of patience," said Duo. "Mother Mary and all the fucking Saints won't get you out of this if you don't start answering my questions now."

Basil had a stutter. Wufei was ready to bet it had developed very suddenly, when Duo had appeared as if by magic in the corner of the dingy backroom in the deepest hidey hole in Bakunin sector that Basil had been able to find.

Finally Basil managed to splutter out the fact that he knew nothing. A three-year-old wouldn't have been convinced.

Basil was soft. He wasn't fat, but his body looked like it was made out of uncooked bread dough. Wufei thought that if he poked Basil, the imprint of his fingers would stay for a few minutes before the flesh rose back. Not that he had any wish to poke Basil. So far Basil hadn't even noticed Wufei, still deep in the shadows of the underground room. This was one of Basil's hideouts; he'd dodged into it when Duo had sent him a polite message that he was waiting outside and would like to meet him 'for information'. But unfortunately for Basil, Duo had been expecting that and he and Wufei had gotten there first.

"Basil, you ain't being smart here," Duo chided, smiling like death. "You owe me, you bastard. Remember that time in the Belts? You're not trying to wiggle out of your debt, are you?"

Basil's soft, round eyes rolled like marbles. He stuttered a few more denials and took two steps back, away from that expression. His movements looked haphazard and driven by nothing but fear, yet all his stumbles were leading him directly towards the concealed rear exit. It led out into Bakunin, a dark sector of ill-repute, a maze of buildings and back alleys, courtyards and gang hangouts. If Basil made it out the back door, they'd never find him again. Since Wufei was leaning against the back door, though, Basil was not going to make it out.
Basil took another drifting step backwards towards the exit, away from Duo's advance. Wufei didn't feel like getting caught between the soft Basil and the hard door, so he extended his sword. The last step pressed Basil's spine into the tip of the scabbard. Basil made a sound like a mouse getting squished and spun around, white as a ghost.

"Oh, you ain't met my Blade yet, have you?" Duo purred. "His name is Chang. If you think I'm scary, then you better look again, pal."

Basil was looking. His little round eyes were fixed on Wufei's like a rabbit staring at a hawk. The thick mouth wobbled and whimpered. "B-bu-but I don't know this Spasson-"

"You know everything, Bas. You ooze out of the pores of this sector like sweat. You hear everything, you see everything. I know you've heard and seen my man."

"B-but-"

"You do say that a lot. I gotta warn you; Chang's very allergic to that word. Now, he may look like a heartless brute to you, but actually, underneath, he's a whole lot worse."

Cue whimper from Basil and another frightened glance at Wufei, who did his best to loom.

"You don't want that lil' 'b-u-t' word of yours to make him mad. He gets very scary when he's mad. Weeping Christ, he even scares the shit out of me."

"B-I- Duo, really-"

"So maybe you should tell me everything you know about Herb Spasson, starting with where he's hiding in Bakunin and who's hiding him, all without using the B word. If you do that, I'll remember it. If you don't, my Blade will remember it. If you had to choose, which one of our memories would you rather be in?"

Wufei tried to imitate the look Heero had given Senator Watson when the latter had suggested Relena go to a local event with only minimal security.

Basil wasn't tough, but he was slippery as a snake. He looked like he was on the verge of melting with terror, yet he wasn't talking. "Duo," he wavered, eyes cautious and calculating. "You got to believe me. I don't know where Herb is. Nobody here does."

Duo examined him for a few seconds and then nodded. "So they moved him."

"I didn't tell you that," Basil said quickly.

"No, you've been a wall of silence," Duo sneered. "So Herb's not here now, but he was hiding out in this sector, right? Cedric Kor told his chums that this is where he dropped off Herb's stuff. This place is full of scum like you, Basil. This is where spacers lay low when they've fucked up in Freeport and they want people to forget them a bit. This is a great place to hide, and Herb was hiding here. Where?"

"I can't tell you, Duo. They'll kill me."

"Will they make it quick? Maybe that's your best bet then. Did I mention Chang's colony founders were initially from some place in China? Did you know the Chinese invented the art of torture?"

Basil yelped. "Now, Duo, you don't mean-"
"It's only a friendly warning, Basil. You see, he may be my Blade, but what he gets up to with people who cross me is sort of his own business. I leave that up to him. So far I'm glad to say nobody's actually had to find out how bad he can get. They'd rather talk to me."

"I'd rather talk to you," said Basil, eyes flinching away from where Wufei had started to innocently toy with the tassels on his sword's hilt.

"Good. Talk then."

"Spasson was here. He moved in six days ago from Haymarket. He shacked up with Mama Miriam. One of her girls left and got married, so Spasson took her room."

"Lucky bugger. Who set him up there?"

"His buddies. War-time friends." Basil was sweating big fat drops. They made his limp blond bangs cling to his forehead. "Please-please Duo, don't make me give you names- if they learn-"

"Chang?" Duo glanced at Wufei, who obligingly loosened his sword from its sheath with a flick of his thumb, making the metal in the scabbard sing.

"Names won't help you!" Basil squealed hurriedly, "Spasson disappeared yesterday!"

"Disappeared?" Duo frowned.

"He took his stuff and left! I swear I'm telling the truth!" Dough-boy started to back away from both of them until he bumped into a wall. "They didn't know he would leave! Al was furious! None of them know-"

"Al?" Duo's eyes narrowed. "As in Albert? Al who?"

Basil blinked and grew completely still.

"I can't tell you that, Duo." His voice was suddenly quiet and serious, though the terror still twisted his vowels, making them tremble. "They'd kill me."

"Bas, you may be a worm, but you're a useful sneak and fence. If one gang had it out for you, the others would probably defend you out of self-interest, so-"

"Not a gang," Basil interrupted with a hushed croak. "Not a gang. These guys- they're serious, Duo. They'd kill me. Bad. They've done it bef- they won't...I know you might beat the crap out of me, but you won't- you won't hurt me too bad. Right?" The last word was plaintive, but the fear in Basil's eyes was no longer for them. Even when Wufei took a menacing step forward without Duo's prompting, Basil did nothing more than crouch against the wall. His moist lips were twisted in a strange resolve. Apparently fear of death could give even a worm a spine.

"This Al...is he small with a face like a rat?" Duo asked slowly.

"F-face like a r-rat?" Basil echoed, expression innocent, but his eyes had flickered.

"Right. So Herb was hidden by Albert, but then yesterday he vanished without telling his buddy Al and the others where he was going. Am I right? Don't make me put Chang on you, Basil. A nod is not worth a bad bruising, not when I'll get it out of you anyway."

Basil swallowed and nodded so quickly it might have been no more than a twitch.

"Do you know why Herb pulled a runner?"
Basil shook his head more firmly.

"Was he maybe scared that Al and the rest of this mysterious organization would try to silence him?"

The round shoulders shrugged helplessly. "Dunno. Er, Al seemed friendly with him. He was upset Herb disappeared."

"Right. Basil, my friend, I want you to do me a favor."

Basil failed to look enthusiastic, until Wufei casually leaned against the wall on Basil's other side. Basil started nodding wildly in agreement before Duo even spoke.

"You're going to keep those greasy ears of yours open, and you're going to tell me if you hear anything about Herb or Al. And you're going to remember that this big, mysterious organization doesn't know you exist, but I do, and so does Chang. You're going to give me as many details as you can, now and in the future, and maybe I'll call off your debt. If I hear you're holding back, though... "

Basil looked from one to the other and gulped.

"What are you grinning at?" Duo asked Wufei when they'd left Basil's hide-away and cleared the grimy, shadowy streets of Bakunin

Wufei, who hadn't been 'grinning' but who might have looked faintly amused, shook his head. "Just thinking. Sometimes, our jobs are quite similar."

"What do you mean?"

"Do you know how many times I've played Good Cop Bad Cop with Heero?"

Duo made a show of putting his nose up in the air and sniffing theatrically. "Don't insult me with the C-word. That's worse than Basil's B-word." The mobile lips had twitched upward into a smile.

Duo had a tattoo on his left hip. Wufei had caught only a brief glimpse of it as he opened the door. Two words one above the other - a name? - just as thick black pants were pulled up over strong legs and firm buttocks. Wufei had focused instantly on the tattoo. It was safer to watch that disappear under the black cloth than just about anything else. He'd not seen it on his first day in Freeport, when he'd caught Duo in the shower. It was a bit to the front, high up on the left hip, right where a lover would rest their hand.

They'd both acted as if nothing had happened. Nothing had happened. Wufei had come back sooner than expected from his shower to let Babka have her turn, and accidentally walked in on his roommate and stool pigeon while the latter was getting dressed. Hardly a crime, even by Wufei's strict standards.

Wufei caught himself observing Duo's left hip several times that day. And the next. His attention gradually waned, but he'd still glance up and focus on it inadvertently whenever Duo stretched back in his swivel chair with one of his huge, full-body yawns that pulled his t-shirt up and his loose pants down.
He could have just asked Duo what that stain of ink spelled out. But it was too trivial to mention, too trivial to even think about.

The chalk scritched horrendously, but Wufei continued to write.

"Have a heart, will you?" Duo whined behind him.

"'Nope, Wu, don't have a white-board.'" Wufei parodied, drawing another line. "What's it look like in here, a bloody conference room? Here, use the wall."

"Wow, you imitate me pretty good. Is that a party trick? You pick up girls that way? Sorry, I mean guys?" Duo's teasing was more grinding than jaunty. They'd run into too many dead ends these past few weeks, and they'd just spent an hour going over them and getting more and more tired and cranky.

"What are the possible links between Carver and Ferret?" Wufei growled, bruising his knuckles on the wall and nearly breaking the chalk. He'd written their names with an arrow between them. "They could be associates." He scratched the word out on the wall.

"Associates in what?" Duo countered in a bored tone. He was leaning back in his swivel chair, hands behind his head, watching the crude evidence board Wufei was putting up. "Carver worked for different political groups according to your bloody info full of holes. You also said he took contracts that weren't political. he offed some financial fraud types too."

"So what are they doing, working together in Freeport?" Wufei muttered, the hand with the wet sponge hesitating over the word Associates.

"They could be buddies. Carver could be another ex-reb. Seems like Ferret - or Al, as he's known - has strong loyalties."

Wufei scratched out the word 'allies' slowly. Duo hadn't sounded all that convinced either. True, Ferret had looked after Herb and seemed keen to protect him rather than silence him. But Carver...Wufei had never seen him except in a smudge of crude pixels in a blurred photograph, but Wufei knew Carver in that area of his soul that didn't require evidence to know right from wrong. Carver was an attack dog, he cut who he was ordered to cut, he wouldn't be the kind to make firm friends and stand by them.

"Or Ferret could be paying Carver to help him," Duo added.

"Paying him? To kill Joshuah Brindlow perhaps?" Wufei tapped the name Josh B. with his finger thoughtfully. It was orbiting Ferret and Carver's names, along with the names of Ravachol, Herb, Mako and a few others that Basil had reported to them.

"I don't know where Josh fits into all that," Duo grumbled. His boots thumped onto his workbench and he stared at them moodily. "And then there's this organization that Ferret belongs to. Not a gang, according to Bas. Don't know what that means, but I'm thinking it's not something I wanted to find in Freeport."

"Why not?" Wufei tossed the chalk into the garbage can. The whole exercise was futile. Over two
weeks and no sign of Herb - but a lot of frightened people who suddenly didn't want to talk to Duo anymore. "Why not? This place is a pressure cooker of malcontents, criminals, thieves, madmen, smugglers."

Duo made a V-sign to the empty air.

"-pirates, ex-rebels, hot-heads and a frightening amount of terrorists. What this place needs-... "

Duo's eyebrows arched as he slowly swiveled towards Wufei. "Yeah? Go on?"

"Maxwell, even you have to admit this place is a pit. People live in fear, disorder and on the constant edge of extinction."

"It needs a bit of law and order, doesn't it?" Duo purred.

Wufei was tired and frustrated and angry at their lack of progress, but even he recognized the danger signals. Unfortunately it just wasn't his nature to let that stop him.

"If you want my opinion, yes," he said coldly, crossing his arms over his chest. "You grew up with tyranny as the only authority, you're biased. But the laws, when applied correctly, allow people to live and prosper in safety."

Duo flowed out of his chair and sauntered towards him, hands in his pockets.

"It's your own creed," Wufei challenged, refusing to be impressed by the slow predatory prowl towards him. "Don't you preach survival above all? Then why do you put up with such desperate conditions? Can't you see that a minimum of laws and civil obedience could improve things here? I'm talking basic safety!"

"Yeah, sure," Duo shrugged. "And if this was still a penitentiary, it'd be safer still."

"What? Maxwell, why do you always exaggerate! I-"

"Yeah, maybe I'm stretching it, but that's what Outside feels like to us," Duo interrupted, stopping before him, hands still stuck in his back pockets. "A lot of guys here are spacer scum. They'd be in jail if they weren't in Freeport. When it comes down to it, the Alliance, OZ or the Peacecraft regime all rely on us to obey them to be safe. Or obey The Law, as you say, but they're the ones who make it, right? Well, that's the problem. We're not tamable, Chang. We're not pets. We're roaches. We survive in our 'desperate conditions', and we thrive. This is our home. Not just Freeport; Space is our home."

Duo was close. Wufei would have to turn his head to look away from those brilliant blue eyes.

"That's what we have here: Space and all its freedom. It's big and it's scary and it's fucking dangerous, but it's also what people first left Earth and came to the colonies to find. Soon, humans will be leaving this dinky lil' solar system, and it will be in a Freeport-built ship with a Sweeper crew, no matter what politico is on the bridge making the speeches. And in the big, fat Unknown out there, who do you think has the better chances of survival? The sheltered planet-dweller, or a Freeport Citizen who's always relied only on himself and his buddies?"

Wufei had his mouth open to counter with...something. Whatever it was vanished from his mind when Duo casually put a hand against the wall near Wufei's shoulder and leaned in, apparently to catch his words all the better.

"I'm a colonist too," Wufei found himself saying without knowing why.
"And as tough as they come," Duo murmured, head tilted slightly, his gaze drifting away from Wufei's to drop to his mouth, his throat-

Wufei pulled back abruptly, the back of his head fetching against the wall, his eyes narrowed in warning.

Duo was motionless for a second as if trying to figure out what he was doing there, then his cheeky smile leaped back into place. "You got chalk in your hair."

Wufei lifted his hand to the back of his head, an automatic gesture to check which was interrupted by Duo leaning away and thumping him on the shoulder.

"Come on. We're stressing out here. Let's go take a hoop break before we kill each other. Best out of thirty? The winner gets the leftover spaghetti, the loser has to eat Babka's cheesy potato things."

Wufei released the breath he realized he'd been holding.

"I have to clean this up," he mumbled, turning towards the marked wall and lifting the wet sponge. "We can't leave it for someone to find if they break in again."

"Do it later," Duo ordered, dragging off his thick sweater and tossing it on his chair in passing. "I know Rav walked in here like I got a revolving door, but I don't think he'd do that while we're in the yard outside."

Wufei put the sponge down and followed before his caution could point out that maybe now was not a good time to have to body-block a sweat-soaked Duo in a flimsy t-shirt.

Too late. And he was damned if he was going to eat Babka's two-day old dish lurking in the fridge. Wufei's resolve reshaped itself swiftly, his control falling into place. He forced his mind to discard the memory of two bright blue eyes, shining with a faith in the future that had no place here, in Freeport's jungle. A faith Wufei had never had; at least, never more than a faint longing and hope when looking at the deep-space explorers or the stars outside...

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Duo wasn't all that good looking. Sure, he had some charm, but if you looked at him analytically -

Wufei's eyes darted disobediently towards their study once more. Duo had gone to sleep earlier. His face was lax, no expression to mask or enhance his natural features. Wufei tore his eyes away again.

Duo didn't seem to mind having him around while he slept, but Wufei couldn't have felt more uncomfortable with his uncontrollable urge to examine his ally if Duo had been sleeping naked.

The image stayed in his mind as he stared blindly at the laptop, and his mind went over it in memory.

Duo's nose was too big and slightly upturned. His mouth was too wide. His body was rife with wiry energy instead of calm self-possession. His braid and bangs were scruffy- in fact, that described him entirely: scruffy. Wufei believed men should be neat, composed, reserved, and though he did not judge a man on his descent, Asian or otherwise, he personally preferred those kinds of features.

Wufei realized he was staring at Duo's profile again. It was bathed in the glow of the laptop Wufei was supposed to be using to review news reports of recent disturbances throughout L3.
Duo wasn't hard to look at, there just wasn't any feature that stood out compared to other men of Wufei's acquaintance. Part of that might simply be a matter of taste.

The lashes - thick and the same brown as his hair - flickered. Wufei was staring instantly at the laptop again. Duo slept lightly and woke up at the slightest provocation; even someone staring at him would probably be enough. He'd gotten used to Wufei's presence over the weeks, but there were limits.

With some difficulty, Wufei refocused on recent incidents that had nearly led to a riot on L3-X034 a week ago.

...The problem was, Duo's features weren't really all that relevant to the man, anymore than studying a single wave meant you'd seen the sea. Not that he had depths, Wufei thought with an inner snort.

No, but he had a faith in himself, in the future, in this chaotic, violent colony, that...that seemed to radiate from him, feeding his restless energy. A self-confidence that made him walk taller than his five-foot-five frame had any right to be. An easy, open demeanor that had no place in a young man who had seen so much death and destruction, and who'd dealt a good amount of it too. And he had a fierce loyalty towards Freeport and the people he met and dealt with, even the criminals; even Ravachol, Wufei remembered bitterly, and wondered why he felt so strongly about it. He didn't think Duo would refuse to do his duty because of it...

Maybe it was because that faith had been placed in Wufei as well. And here, tonight, in the glow of the laptop's screen - scrolling through riots where he should have been present, rather than rotting in Freeport - tonight Wufei didn't feel worthy of it, and not only because his presence here was in part a sham.

Wufei had no faith. He lived for Justice because it was his duty to the dead. He had faith in nothing and no one.

He was staring again. Duo had turned his face slightly into his pillow, but otherwise hadn't moved. He looked warm and comfortable in that bed. Wufei absently rubbed his arms, feeling the chill in the room. His eyes were growing heavy looking at that peacefully sleeping form.

Wufei quietly and deliberately closed the laptop, banishing the image illuminated by its phosphorescent glow. He slipped into the sleeping bag, still fully dressed, but he didn't feel any warmer when he drifted off into a restless sleep.

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They waited until the hallway was empty and most of the workers in the sector had gone to bed before Duo rapped gently on Agostina's door. He had that annoyed and worried look in his eyes, the one he'd been wearing for the past few days since they'd talked to Basil for the third time. His expression cleared when footsteps sounded on the other side of the door. Wufei, oddly fascinated, watched out of the corner of his eye as the anxiety over their lack of progress was pushed down, lost among other currents of thoughts and emotions, open and honest yet by their very presence masking others. The self-assurance that seemed to underpin Duo's personality came to the fore along with a pleasant smile as the knob turned.

"Yes?" Agostina muttered, opening the door and pulling her bathrobe close around her ample bosom.
Duo opened his mouth—Agostina's dark eyes widened and then the door slammed shut in their face.

Duo stood gazing at it. Strangely enough he didn't look surprised, unlike Wufei who'd half-drawn his sword out of sheer startled reflex. There was a steely look in Duo's eyes and his smile had become razor-sharp.

He knocked again gently.

"Go away!" The shout was muffled through the door.

"Agostina."

"Go away! I won't talk to you!"

"Why not? Who told you not to, signora?"

"N-nobody. Go away, please!"

"How about Herb?"

"I don't know where he is!" The voice was almost hysterical.

"Don't you want to know?"

There was silence for a few seconds, and Wufei thought he heard a muffled sob.

"Come on, Agostina," Duo whispered near the worn plastic of the doorframe. "It's been nearly three weeks since his 'friends' came to get him. Aren't you worried?"

Of course she was worried. More than that, though, she was scared.

"I-I can't talk to you. You're trouble." Agostina sounded plain miserable.

"Who said that, Signora?"

"Everybody! They all said it! Go away!"

"They all said it?" Duo's eyes gleamed in the dimly lit hallway. "You don't just mean Herb's friends, do you. Who else talked to you? What's Herb caught up in, Agostina? Who's after him? Do you know he's cut and run from his friends too? Did they also show up here to ask you if you'd seen him?"

There was a sharp sob and a thump as she leaned heavily against the door.

"Herb's all alone out there now. You know what that means. Who's after him? Are his friends looking for him to protect him, or-"

There was a sliding noise and the sobs tumbled down to near floor level. Wufei stared down in pity as if he could see the heart-broken, frightened woman huddled there.

Duo slowly sank into a crouch, reached out and touched the door gently. "Don't cry, pretty signora. I'm doing my best to find Herb, and I don't mean him any harm. In fact the sooner he talks to me, the safer he'll be. You know who I am, right? Did some of the men who came to threaten you tell you who I was?"

Agostina whimpered an affirmative.
"I know Herb hasn't contacted you. They came here to pick him up, they're wise to this address. He'll know better than to return here or send a message. That doesn't mean anything bad's happened to him."

Yet, Wufei mentally added.

"Listen to me carefully, Agostina. They might be watching you, but they have no reason to harm you, so don't worry too much. But if you ever feel you're in danger, you go and talk to a friend of mine in this sector. Eric Gervaise, 301 on Eighteenth. Got that? He'll get you to me discreetly, and I'll get you out of here. Just for a while. Okay? I have a very fast ship and permanent take-off permission for emergencies." The gloved fingers soothed the chipped paint of the door. "If you show up, I'll use it. I swear I won't ask you any questions or anything about Herb. Okay?"

Agostina didn't answer, but her crying had turned to sniffles.

"Goodbye, signora. Be safe," Duo whispered. He stood in one fluid movement, his eyes hard as they pierced the darkness of the dingy hallway around them.

Wufei followed Duo out, scrutinizing the buildings and the few people around them, looking for the spies who were apparently following them, threatening the people they talked to. He'd been surprised that Ravachol had not acted against them after his visit and threats. It looked like he was taking the circumventive measure of blocking their enquiries instead.

"We should have broken down that door and gotten her away immediately," said Wufei once they'd rejoined the back alleys, keeping an eye open for tails.

"She's in no immediate danger," Duo answered. "She's got friends here, she's a good citizen. Hassling her would stand out as much as Josh's murder in Kro. They can't afford that."

That was Freeport logic, presumably. It kept this insane asylum from descending into complete chaos. It worked; it had apparently been working for decades. Anyway, Agostina wasn't a witness. Wufei had not been ordered to protect her. She knew nothing useful and it was doubtful Herb would contact her now, Wufei should concentrate his energies into his investigation-

To hell with it.

Wufei grabbed Duo's arm and spun him around. He kept his voice low with respect to the few passersby, but he did not hide the threat as he said: "If they hurt her, this colony won't be big enough to hide them, even if I have to spend the rest of my life here."

Duo didn't tell him to shut up or behave like a Blade. "That's why she'll be safe," was all he said. He had the same promise in his eyes.

They walked around Vanzetti a couple of times, just to check, then they headed on home in silence. Words were unnecessary.

Duoha few bad habits; the kind any bachelor developed as well as a few unique to ex-Gundam pilots. When he was bored for instance, or frustrated, he'd sit on his bed and toss his collection of daggers at a crude chalk bulls-eye he'd drawn on the opposite wall. Table manners were an unknown
Duo ate very fast, talking with his mouth full. And he talked a lot. He didn't do his
laundry often enough either. Granted, the community launderette was eight blocks away, but Duo
led a very active life and he could do with changing his socks a bit more often in Wufei's fastidious
opinion.

Still, Duo was far more pleasant a roommate than Wufei would have thought, especially as they were
living together in such a small space. Wufei had never even considered that potential problem when
Trowa had sent him here; he'd been ready to ignore Maxwell for the good of the mission and leave it
at that. But the mission was something that took over their lives from the time they closed the front
door behind them to the time they returned. The time he lived with Duo had become the ground rock
on which it was based, the shelter that let him rest.

Wufei had never lived with anybody before.

He was overly sensitive of impinging on Duo's space. Duo didn't seem to mind, but Wufei knew that
he was taking up as much room in Duo's life as Duo was in his. Heero had apparently been a very
quiet roommate; he'd asked few questions and stayed entirely focused on the missions. Whereas
Wufei grew bored and restless. He went out. He talked - well, listened - to Babka and Gilla and other
neighbors. He probed Duo for information about Freeport's society while trying not to ask any
obvious questions, a game of wits they were both beginning to enjoy.

Wufei also had a considerable temper that easily matched that of his host. His was cold and hard
where Duo's was hot and loud. Flare-ups were frequent, but mostly resolved with a glare or a few
sarcastic comments followed by a cooling down period.

All in all it was working out pretty well, and Wufei wondered if Duo was as surprised about that fact
as he was.

"Another email from Morgenstern."

Wufei glanced up from the encrypted notes he was scribbling down, a memo of the latest information
they'd gathered, most of it regarding their non-progress at finding anybody or anything pertinent.
"Again?"

"Yes. Says he'd like to..." Duo's eyes returned to the screen, "-invite us over to dinner and chat some
more about the troubles in the colonies. Chat. Do I chat? Old ladies with poodles chat. I'm a guy; I
talk."

Wufei considered the message, ignoring Duo's soliloquy that went with it with the ease of practice.
Morgenstern had initiated a campaign to get Wufei to move to Kropotkin. He'd invited them over
once before, and they'd gone, hoping to gather some information about the murder in the sector.
Morgenstern had listened to Duo's questions carefully, but had not been able to give them any clues.
Then he'd talked at length about the freedom of the colonies, the problems the inhabitants of Space
faced in an Earth-governed future. How so many good colonists lived in Kropotkin, and he was
always keen to see more settle down there.

It had been interesting to listen to him. The man was obviously very intelligent. But some of his
opinions made the Preventer's hackles twitch, while Morgenstern's interest in Wufei's future was
becoming a liability.

"I'll say we're too busy," Duo muttered, typing quickly. "Put him off a bit. Hopefully he'll forget about you."

Wufei thought that Duo was the one Morgenstern was mainly interested in, and the man was talking about Wufei's plans in a hope of roping in the smuggler. But he didn't correct his friend.

"Any other news?" he grunted, writing up a summary of the case's progress to date (which didn't take long). He'd have to go and drop Trowa a report at some point, to give him the information and mainly to signal to his friend and commanding officer that Wufei was still alive. After that he had to clean up the grease they'd spilled in the yard, and nag Duo into doing the dishes.

He glanced up as he realized that his usually voluble ally hadn't answered. Duo was staring at an email on his screen.

"Duo?"

"We've found Herb," Duo stated.

"What? Where?!"

"Recyc."

Wufei drew in a short, sharp breath. Damn, they were too late-

"Alive," Duo added. "Apparently he's hiding out in Recyc. That was clever of him. Most people don't have any dealings with the Trolls, so they wouldn't know to look for him there. No wonder we couldn't find him."

"Is this information reliable? Who sent it?" Wufei, ever the paranoid Preventer, asked.

"A fellow rat-catcher. I passed Herb's details around to the rest of the gang. The mail's kinda cryptic for security reasons, but as far as I can make out, my buddy was going through the lower ends of the colony looking for his own prey and spotted Herb talking to a pirate. My buddy followed Herb when they'd finished talking, all the way to Recyc."

"A pirate?"

"Easiest and fastest way of getting out of Freeport on the sly," Duo answered tightly, springing up from his chair and reaching for the coat he'd tossed lazily onto the counter earlier.

"He's making a run for it?" Wufei shot to his feet and reached for his sword.

"That's my guess. The thing is, pirates are a tight-knit bunch with their own loyalties. They might tell Herb's enemies about this if they think it's in their best interest. I hope Herb didn't just go and blow his cover." Duo was already at the door, checking his spring-loaded dagger automatically.

"Then I guess we better find Herb first," Wufei said, Shouldering on his jacket.

"That sums it up, buddy. We'll take the train, no time to waste walking around. I'll keep my eyes out for what's ahead, you try to spot any tails. Got it?"

Wufei nodded crisply.

If they found Herb, the latter should now be scared enough to tell them all about Ferret and Carver in
exchange for Duo's smuggling him out to safety. With Ferret and Carver's names, they'd find the bastards fairly quickly. Wufei felt sure, in his gut, that Carver was working for Ravachol, which should give Duo some means of defense against the crime lord. Once Duo was safe, Wufei could pursue Carver on the Outside with a clear conscience. Trowa would probably assign a whole team to Ferret as well, so Wufei wouldn't have to worry about that rodent either.

That was what was going to happen. He was going to leave Freeport, Duo, the neighbors, the dingy streets, the sharp scrutinies, the smiles and frowns, the small habits and customs that had filled his days for a time that seemed to stretch back much further than it had any right to considering he'd only landed two months ago. He'd leave all this and go back to a temporary apartment in a Preventer office somewhere, and deal with his job, and-

He couldn't see it. He could barely remember what the last apartment he'd lived in looked like. He'd never known any of the names of his neighbors. Only his job felt real. His duty.

That would be all he had soon. Wufei tried to convince himself that this small, strange episode in his life would soon be over. It was oddly hard to believe.
"This is necessary
This is necessary
Life feeds on life feeds on life feeds on life feeds on-
This is necessary
This is necessary
Life feeds on life feeds on life feeds on life feeds on life."
---Tool, 'Disgustipated'

When he saw the simple airlock, Wufei realized with some embarrassment that he'd expected a large somber portal with 'Abandon all hope' or something equally pithy above the frame.

He checked his self-directed berating over the frivolous thought when he realized that Duo had not yet reached out to spin the airlock's handle. His friend had spent a few minutes disarming the security net on the entrance, but didn't seem in any hurry to open it. Duo was tapping his chin and staring at the door as if he still suspected an alarm. Come to think of it, he had been unusually quiet all the way to Recyc.

"Maxwell?" Wufei finally prompted.

"Just thinking how we want to handle this," Duo said. "The Trolls aren't a bunch we want to cross."

Wufei had heard the term before and let it slide as just one more thing that annoyed the hell out of him in Freeport. But here, at the door to Recycling, it was harder to ignore.

"Don't call them that."

"Huh?" Duo glanced at him, concentration broken.

"Tr- what you call them. It's ludicrous. And prejudicial too."

"Here's the PC shit again," Duo sighed. "What do you call them on the Outside?"

Wufei scoured his memory for the term that surely he must know. "Recycling Technicians," he finally hazarded.

"Well here, they call themselves Trolls," Duo answered briskly. "They deal with shit, piss, death and decay. They got the worst job on the colony, or possibly the best if you look at it from their point of view: nobody ever bugs them or rubs them the wrong way, that's for sure. And that includes us. So here's a quick list of do's and don'ts. Don't annoy them. If they tell us to leave, we leave. If they attack us, we run without a fight. If you see a door with a skull - that'll be a real one on our colony, by the way, not a namby-pamby sign - then you don't touch, you don't enter, you don't even look too close. If-"

"What kind of- of barbarians live in there?!"

"Well, that's just the question, ain't it. What kind of people would do this?" Duo asked him, cocking his head at Wufei. "Come on, even on the Outside, people working in Recyc are weird. Comes from
turning dead bodies into plant food and water all day long, as well as recycling every other bit of waste the human body produces. Well in Freeport, they have the freedom to be as damn weird as they want to be, and that's pretty weird, let me tell you. They form tribes, I'm told, depending on what their specialty is; they have their own lil' society, their own religion of death and rebirth, their own rules, their own customs, and they don't like outsiders. I can't guess how Herb got them to put him up; he must have connections. We don't. Much. I did a favor for- but that was a long time ago, and I don't count on it being remembered. So we go in very smoothly, very discreetly, and if they find us, very politely. Or we won't be leaving. Got it?"

Wufei grumbled something about chaos and anarchy which Duo took as an affirmative like he usually did. The rat-catcher stepped up towards the airlock and spun the wheel. The lock hissed open; a wash of damp, fetid air trickled out. It brushed them like a drowned man's fingers and went to haunt the cold, dry streets of the living.

Wufei had always known he had a bit more imagination than a good warrior needed, and he'd learned to keep it under tight control. He roped it back in again now and concentrated on their surroundings and their task.

The door opened into a narrow, dark corridor full of pipes, similar to the maintenance shafts beneath sector floors. The lighting was faint, from distantly spaced light bulbs with a mesh of wire over them to keep people from burning themselves against hot glass. Oily water dripped from pipes, electrical cords and ceiling, and the air was stuffy and increasingly warm; the rendering, flocculation and fermentation process produced heat and humidity that would feel like luxuries in Freeport if you didn't know where they actually came from. Despite a deep-seated distaste shared by any colonist, Wufei breathed in and out deeply, getting used to these new conditions. They might have to fight or run at any moment, and a cramp at that point wouldn't be good news. The air was musty and smelled of chemicals that were not the usual run of Freeport stinks, but if the Technicians were doing their job correctly down here, it shouldn't smell of anything worse.

His eyes swept their surrounding as they came to a small junction thirty feet down the corridor. Then he looked again more closely, taking in all the details. The corridor junction was ten feet by fifteen, its black walls decorated with splashes of red paint, crude pictograms that only the denizens of this realm would understand. And a bundle of shinbones twisted in wire hung from the ceiling.

Duo was right, Wufei concluded darkly. These people were not Recycling Technicians. They were definitely Trolls.

"They believe in setting the mood right from the start," Duo whispered over his shoulder. "It's just a way of keeping people out. They're fairly nutty, but they're not that bad."

Oh good, Wufei thought sarcastically. As a warrior, he wasn't disturbed or frightened by this reminder of his own mortality, but it was an indication of the kind of people they were dealing with here. It tallied with Duo's unease outside. They would have to watch their steps very carefully.

Wufei wasn't impressed, but deep inside, beneath the Preventer and the warrior, a young child felt oddly vindicated. That six-year-old Wufei had always known that Recyc was a troll's lair.

Not that anybody had told Wufei about it when he was that age. Recyc was a taboo that the adults themselves rarely discussed or thought of. The broader subject of waste management was a serious issue, the sort of thing an election campaign would hang on; how to get rid of the masses of garbage produced by humans when they lived in a contained environment without polluting the space lanes that were their lifeblood. Every colony recycled its garbage to the hilt, not only to save on imported replacements, but also to avoid paying for removal by Sweepers.
But nobody wanted to remember that the human body produced a good amount of that garbage in need of recycling before becoming a piece of it itself.

As a child, Wufei wasn't supposed to know anything about this. But children had their own stories and rumors about what happened in the shadowy sectors of their colony and in the void of Space around them. The stories were forgotten as the children grew up, yet they somehow passed to the next generation, discussed in horrified, excited whispers after the adults had switched off the lights. Recyc was full of Mole Men who built their castles out of bones. In the vacuum around the colony lived a long-haired hag whose tendrils could invade and rip apart anything not kept tight. And at the heart of their colony lived a secret sun which only Master Li was allowed to visit; if the old man died without a successor, it would come out and set the colony on fire.

Wufei swallowed the bitter taste in his mouth. Turned out that last one had been all too real. He shook his head, dispelling memories of happier days and the blood and fire that had destroyed all he knew. That fire had forged him into the sword he was today, and dwelling in regret on the past would serve no purpose and weaken him. He brought his wayward concentration back to where it belonged, focusing on Duo's shape a few feet ahead. Really too much imagination for a warrior...

The corridor led out to a ramp snaking its way up the wall of a big room. A huge machine loomed in its centre, its purpose unclear. It didn't look like it was working. Wufei barely glanced at the still, silent hulk, concentrating on the space around it, scouring the darkness for enemies and potential hiding places.

Duo stopped at the top of the ramp, checking the hallway opening before them. Wufei took the opportunity to lean close to him and whisper into his ear. "How are we going to find Herb in here?"

He'd known before coming that Recyc was as big as a sector in itself, but he thought it would be one large well-lit factory, with helpful citizens to guide them to a dorm where Spasson would be hiding. The reality was more convoluted than he'd thought, and there were no signs of the natives, friendly or otherwise.

"We're going to go round to where Recyc leads into that sector where Herb was seen," Duo muttered, glancing at a palm top with a blueprint of the colony's inner sectors scrolling over it - a somewhat illegal possession that Heero had apparently hacked for him ages ago. "If he's looking to bargain a way out, he won't be too far from there."

"Why didn't we go there in the first place?"

"Because I'm still not sure we don't have a tail," said Duo, glancing behind him. "I could swear there's somebody at my back, Wu, although maybe it's only Mister Paranoia. Dunno. Not taking the risk. They won't follow us through recyc."

"I don't blame them," muttered Wufei as they skirted a squat machine with a dusty skull perched atop of its control console. "These people are obviously insane. More so than the rest of the colony, I mean."

"I'm not saying it'll be easy to get to Herb in here," Duo continued, ignoring the observation. "We may not find him. I got Cesar - remember him? That rat-catcher in Zapata? He's watching the pirate route for me. I'm gonna owe him solid if Herb slips through our fingers and Cesar has to pick him up before he bolts. Come on, let's do our best."

Wufei nodded tersely and followed Duo through the dark tunnels.

They came across their first sign of activity ten minutes later. Noises echoed from up ahead. Duo
slowed. He and Wufei were not hiding as such, but they were trying to be discreet; if nobody saw them, all the better. Duo took a corridor at a right angle to their route and ghosted up some stairs, Wufei on his heels. There was a window along the new tunnel they entered. It looked down upon the room they'd skirted.

Four men were maneuvering an electric cart onto some rails. They were dressed in the usual grey factory jumpsuits, but in addition they had large red scarves around their shoulders, necks and faces and they were wearing hard hats. Wufei suddenly remembered seeing similarly dressed figures in the streets from time to time.

The cart was a flat-topped carry-all with two body bags on it.

"Those are outer Trolls, the guys who maintain the sewer pipes, collect organic waste and go and pick up the dead from the morgue and wakes," Duo whispered, staying out of sight of the men below. Wufei stared at them over Duo's shoulder, noting absently that Duo smelled of the generic shampoo he used, much more appealing than the rank chemical scent that haunted the air around them.

"The other guy's an inner Troll," Duo added, tilting his chin towards the fifth figure. The man was short and squat, and wore a shapeless grey plastic poncho falling to his waist. Beneath it peeped a grimy plastic apron which had been transparent at one point in its existence. It hung all the way down to his thick plastic boots. He wore a large surgical mask over his lower face, goggles and a hard hat with a light affixed to it. Nearly every inch of skin was covered and his face masked by all that equipment was a non-human shape out of a nightmare. Mole Men in their burrows of bones...Wufei shook his head to dislodge the memory.

"Duo," he whispered. Duo started slightly and twitched towards him, close enough for Wufei to feel the warmth of his skin even through Recyc's heat and humidity. "I've said it before but it bears repeating. Your colony is a madhouse."

"Really?" Duo murmured, a small smile on his face. "I think any human who lives surrounded by vacuum is crazy, buddy. In Freeport, we just show our true colors."

"That you do. Now, are we going to ask one of them where Herb is?"

"They won't tell us. But I know where we are now."

"...Did you just say we were lost before?" Wufei inquired, his mouth an inch from Duo's ear.

"Not lost, just turned around a little. We're near the sector Herb was seen in. Let's root around once they're gone."

The outer Trolls finished putting the cart onto its tracks. One of them handed the inner Troll computer chits - death certificates presumably - with an oddly ceremonial gesture, and the inner Troll accepted them with the arrogance of a high priest receiving a sacrifice before turning and shuffling away. The cart hummed and lurched after him, apparently of its own volition. He must have a remote under that poncho. The outer Trolls waited until both man and cart had disappeared behind a curtain of plastic slats, then they headed towards a distant airlock, pushing a gurney before them.

Wufei and Duo waited until everybody had left, then went back down the stairs and, after Duo had glanced at his palm top, headed across the receiving room towards a door further along, near the plastic curtain.

They walked through corridors and tunnels, occasionally dodging down one to avoid a Troll
lumbering along. The latter were fortunately easy to spot with their headlamps gleaming from a distance.

"There's a place up ahead where they pack up the hydroponics supplies into barrels and crates," Duo breathed into Wufei's ear as they stopped in the shadows to let another round light bob past by like a corpse's candle. "I bet that's where Herb's waiting. It's not as creepy as the rest of Recyc, and it's near the place where he met with that pirate."

"Lead on," Wufei muttered, following the disappearing Troll with his eyes.

"This way - shit!"

Duo leapt back, almost running into Wufei.

"That's not good," Duo muttered, sticking his head cautiously around the frame of the open door. Wufei imitated him.

The door opened out onto a platform of metal grids half way up the wall of a huge room. An industrial-size air-purifier, the best one Wufei had seen to date in Freeport, huffed and hissed in its center; the room was a maze of pipes, metal stairs and gangways leading to various points of the building-sized machine.

Wufei analyzed the decor with one glance, and focused on what Duo had seen; two men were on the landing of some stairs on the opposite wall, nearly hidden by a corner of the huge air purifier. Superficially they looked like the outer Trolls, with red scarves over their faces, but they weren't wearing hats or thick plastic boots, and their nervous tension could be felt sixty feet away. They were both holding crossbows as well. It was obvious these men didn't belong here and were well aware of it.

"Herb's 'friends', looking for him?" Wufei murmured.

"That's what it looks like. Somebody else must have heard about him breaking cover. Either that, or the pirate sold him out." Duo's eyes were narrowed like gun sights, tracing the distant shapes of the two men.

"What do we do now? Does it look like they found Herb?"

"Hard to say-"

Both of the strangers started. Duo leaned back abruptly, tense against Wufei's body, but neither of them were the cause of the men's alarm. A third figure had appeared at the head of the stairs. The two armed men seemed to recognize him, and went over to talk to him.

Duo was out the door in an instant, walking as silently as a ghost along the metal grid of the gangway. Wufei followed him quickly, any shuffle of boot against metal covered by the hisses and grinding clangs from the purifier. But if those men glanced down, he and Duo would be sitting ducks on that gangway, a sword and knives against a pair of crossbows.

He kept his eyes fixed on Duo's back, ears open for sudden shouts behind them. Ten steps, and the bulk of the machine was between them and the men. Wufei breathed easier. Up ahead, Duo ducked under the gangway's thin rail and hung precariously over a thirty foot drop. Then he leapt gracefully and silently towards a huge pipe that rose up against the wall to disappear through a hole in the distant ceiling. Duo grabbed the flimsy ladder at the side of the pipe to break his fall, and started to climb quickly. Wufei followed as silently as he could.
Fifteen feet up, near the ceiling, the pipe passed by two platforms, one on either side. Duo shimmied around the large pipe in a move that Wufei could only hope he'd be able to imitate, and leapt, black coat flaring out behind him, towards the platform furthest away. He was heading across the room towards the men they'd seen while staying above them and hopefully out of their sight.

Wufei arrived at that height and took a deep breath. The pipe was in sections, rim bolted against rim at the joins; about an inch of foot purchase around a smooth cylindrical object over a fifty-foot drop. Easy. He took a deep breath, then another, eyes fixed on the railing of the platform he was aiming for, assuming he made it that far.

Duo glanced back to see if he was following.

Wufei saw the blue eyes widen, heard Duo gasp-

Instincts sent Wufei half-falling, half-sliding down the ladder a few rungs, head tucked into his shoulders. Something hissed overhead and bit into the metal pipe where his skull had been.

Duo's yell - "Wufei!" - echoed over the shouts from the men ten feet below as they heard the commotion without being able to see it where it was coming from.

Beneath Wufei's fingers, the rung he was gripping gave a sickening lurch. The blade that had nearly severed his head had cut into the ladder; the fixtures holding it to the pipe nearest the cut had already sprung loose under his weight. The ones near his hands were giving an alarming metal squeak he could feel as much as hear over the shouts and the sound of a blade being wrenched from metal.

Wufei didn't hesitate. He pushed away from the ladder with all his might, leaping straight back. It tore away under his feet - he threw himself twisting through the air and managed to grab the edges of a gangway above him.

Unfortunately, his lifeline was also the platform his attacker had been standing on when he'd launched his attack at Wufei. Footsteps clanged on the metal near his left hand.

Duo shouted, the maniac cry he'd used in Deathscythe. Wufei heard a stiletto hiss through the air. But Duo was on the other side of the pipe, and with the ladder gone, he couldn't come back to help.

Trusting that Duo's blade would have either downed or distracted his enemy for that crucial second, Wufei did the mother of all pull-ups and hoisted himself onto the platform in one smooth movement, sliding beneath the railing and unsheathing his sword at the end of the roll. His blade was up and in a parry instinctively. A weight crashed down on it like an avalanche. Wufei twisted and bent beneath it, dissipating the shock of impact. If his opponent had hoped to break Wufei's wrists or blade, he would be disappointed.

Wufei, on one knee, gazed up past the straight metal of his sword, past the thick wide blade of a machete, into Carver's face.
Chapter 21

"Entre chiens et loups
Quand tombe la nuit"

(Between dogs and wolves
When the night falls)
---Mano Negra, 'La Ventura'

Carver towered over him in the dim light of old neon and dusty bulbs. Wufei’s eyes flickered over his
target. Chest like a wall, light body armor from shoulder to groin, knee-length brown coat over it. A
red scarf had slipped down from a square face set in a neutral expression that was at odds with the
fact he'd just tried to kill Wufei twice in short succession.

A non-Preventer-approved smile twisted Wufei’s mouth as he looked past their crossed weapons into
inexpressive brown eyes. He'd immediately committed Carver's features to memory now that he'd
finally seen him face to face, but there would be no more need to track the killer down in the streets
of Freeport. Since Carver had attacked him, Wufei would insure he would cease to be a menace to
society, here and now and forever.

Carver was fast. The machete was a blur as it was yanked away from Wufei's sword and up, ready to
cleave the smaller man in two.

Wufei was faster. His body uncoiled like a shot and his elbow slammed upwards right into Carver's
throat.

The killer fell back in surprise, coughing. Wufei spun and cut low, trying to score Carver's thigh
below the body armor that protected his chest and abdomen. Carver stepped back almost as quickly.
Wufei's blade caught the brown coat and sliced off a button.

The machete retaliated immediately. No smile on Carver's face, no recognition or challenge. There
was nothing but Wufei's extermination in those eyes. Wufei felt a flash of pity for Joshua Brindlow;
the small, skinny Freetrader had not stood a chance.

Wufei dodged the blow and stayed within Carver's reach, turning his relative shortness into an
advantage as the killer couldn't swing freely and use all of his massive strength. Wufei dodged a grab
and his free fist shot out, seeking the edge of the body armor near the shoulder; a feint. At the same
time his sword came down, a short hard blow aimed at Carver's left wrist to disarm him. If Carver
lost the hand as well as the machete, all the better.

In a move that spoke of many battles, Carver ignored the light punch, jerked his machete away,
turning his relative shortness into an
advantage as the killer couldn't swing freely and use all of his massive strength. Wufei dodged a grab
and his free fist shot out, seeking the edge of the body armor near the shoulder; a feint. At the same
time his sword came down, a short hard blow aimed at Carver's left wrist to disarm him. If Carver
lost the hand as well as the machete, all the better.

In a move that spoke of many battles, Carver ignored the light punch, jerked his machete away,
avoiding the sword cut aimed at his wrist and turned the evasion into a sideways swipe that could
have cut Wufei in two.

Wufei leapt back, parrying at the same time, letting the machete slide against his blade and flicking
the point upwards at the end of the parry in an attempt to catch Carver in the arm again. Carver
hissed. He'd been about to step forward and press his advantage. Instead he fell back. His free hand
reached for the slice in his coat over the biceps, and he glanced with no apparent emotion at the stain
of blood on his fingers.

The two fighters were motionless, blades ready, weighing each other. Carver's eyes narrowed a
fraction, reevaluating Wufei and his skill.

Wufei chanced a glance behind his enemy, worried at having heard nothing from Duo. His friend was still on the other platform, where he'd been stranded by Carver cutting the ladder on the pipe separating them. Duo was standing above a slumped form near a door out of the room; apparently another of their foe had been nearby. Duo was gripping an empty crossbow in one hand and riffling his victim's clothes for bolts. He'd already used his one throwing dagger earlier; it must have hit Carver's body armor.

There was a startled shout behind Wufei. The Preventer instinctively dodged and pressed his back to the wall.

The gangway he and Carver were on led to a rounded door out of the room. A small figure in a red scarf stood there, beady eyes fixed on Wufei and nearly popping out of their skull. Ferret. And Herb was standing behind him, looking frightened and unsure. Wufei could afford no more than a glance. Carver was too high caliber a fighter to ignore. Wufei would have to kill or disable him first.

"The Trolls spotted us! We gotta get out of here!" Ferret shouted, his voice high and panicky. "The boss told you to stick with me!"

Carver's eyes flickered towards Ferret. His lips twitched into a sneer, there and gone again the next instant.

Then the machete came whistling straight at Wufei, a crude, powerful blow. Wufei grunted as he parried. The force of the attack slammed him into the wall. Breathless and bruised, his sword nonetheless darted out instinctively, finding the opening such a brazen attack would have left- but the weapon's point glanced off the edge of body armor and bit into open space. Wufei stumbled. Carver hadn't carried through, hadn't even stayed around to see if his blow had gotten Wufei out of the way; he'd just leapt past the smaller man and was already halfway across the gangplank, heading towards Ferret, the loud clang of his boots setting up an avalanche of echoes in the air purifier's well.

"Come on, Herb! This way!" Ferret pushed Spasson's shoulder and the taller man stumbled towards an elevator platform at the far end of the gangway. It looked like he was going with them willingly, and Wufei wondered why.

Ferret yanked the scarf away from his mouth and whipped a small com unit from his pocket.

"Ralph! Tor!" the small man shouted, his voice more assured now that he had Carver between him and Wufei. "Get your asses in gear! We got two meddlers here. The boss wants them dead! Get all your guys on it!"

Damn.

Ferret turned towards Wufei with a sneer on his face, an expression that turned to abject terror when a crossbow bolt slammed into the metal half a foot from his ear. Behind Wufei, Duo muttered a curse at having missed. He'd probably been aiming at Carver; the killer had dodged the shot with casual ease and hadn't bothered to glance over his shoulder to see if Ferret or Herb had been pinned. Definitely not old war buddies...

Ferret and Herb jumped onto the elevator platform, which ground and clanked downwards, towards the level where more men waited to cover their escape with their crossbows. Carver stayed put for just a second longer, a barrier between Wufei and the others. In that short span of time their gazes met, a thread of heat flickered in Carver's eyes, a dark promise. One day, they would finish this fight, and only one man would walk away from it.
Then he was gone, still without a word, dropping silently from the gangway onto the elevator platform already ten feet below. Wufei, who had no intention whatsoever of waiting a second longer to finish their discussion, pushed himself away from the wall and started to pursue -

- and found himself flat on the ground, winded, with a heavy weight on his back.

He tensed, but the presence above him was familiar, as familiar as the vibrating noise of a crossbow bolt planted in cheap metal sidings somewhere where his chest would have been.

"Head down!" Duo hissed above him. "Our friends downstairs found themselves a better shooting angle."

"How-how did you-" In Wufei's mind, the large pipe loomed between the two platforms above a fifty-foot drop. Duo must have a cat somewhere in his ancestry to get past that obstacle so quickly.

"I think we lost Ferret again," Duo muttered. "And Carver."

Wufei bared his teeth in impotent denial. No! Not when he'd been so close!

A shout bounced around the walls of the large room. A bolt whistled above their heads and hit the wall.

"And these guys are trying to kill us," Duo added, as if remembering a minor annoyance. He squirmed off of Wufei and rolled over onto his side.

"Duo...?" Wufei licked his lips and tried to push down his battle fervor and blinding hurry to go after Carver long enough to marshal all the diplomacy he had, pitiful amount that it was. "It's essential to our future missions in Freeport that you survive, but Carver- I can go after him, and you can try to make your way out, you can sneak out of here if I'm not-"

"I know what you're gonna say and you can stop now," said Duo in a lazy tone full of sharp angry edges.

"But-"

"We can still tail Carver if we go now and try to follow them."

"No," Wufei growled, his fingers tightening on his sword's hilt till they creaked. "It's too big a risk for you. Look, just get out of here and wait for me at the door to Recyc."

"Sure, I'm sure the Trolls will give me a small potted plant with a few of your remains in it if I asked. We go together or not at all," Duo stated as another wild shot ricocheted over their heads, the bolt tumbling a few feet away from them.

Wufei wanted to yell, to curse, to order- which would bring him absolutely zero results apart from a little energy wasted. With a snarl he started crawling towards the door from which Carver, Ferret and Herb had emerged. Once out of the room, the shooters below would no longer be able to target them. Duo followed with a snort, probably a comment on Wufei's temper.

Wufei rolled through the door in one movement, sword ready. It led out onto a short corridor to another gangplank Wufei could barely make out in the darkness. He could hear shouts echoing from somewhere in the dimly lit sector around them. If the men who'd been shooting at them found a way around, or if they had com units, then life was about to get interesting.

He had to get the two of them out. He had to get Duo out. But...Carver...Wufei's fingers clenched on
his sword hilt.

"Relax, man," Duo whispered, patting him on the shoulder while casting a cautious glance behind them for the shooters. "It's okay. We'll track 'em down again."

"We're back to square one." Wufei glared down the empty corridor as if he could conjure Carver and Ferret before him through sheer force of will.

"Not quite, not." Duo jerked back. A crossbow bolt shot through the opening of the door and thudded against the opposite wall. "I'll explain later. Let's move."

The next room over was as big as a hangar. It contained huge hermetically sealed vats of something that it was better not to think about it too closely. The air was heavy with the smell of chemicals and fermentation. Five men weaved their ways around the vats, heading towards the main door to the purifier room, reinforcements for the two crossbow shooters.

As the first one passed, Wufei dropped down from the vat atop which he'd hunkered down. His extended arm scythed into the leader's shoulder, bringing the man down with a startled shout. Wufei landed crouched and flexible. His sword shot out and cut into the stomach of the next thug in line.

A third man hoisted a spiked mace, but Wufei was on him before he could swing. The sword grated against his opponent's ribs, doubling him over, then Wufei's fist sent him crashing back into the vat. The creep fell down like he'd been shot.

Wufei breathed out, senses tingling. He knew without looking that behind him that Duo had already disabled and probably killed the last two men. Wufei turned back towards his first victim who'd just sat up, rubbing his shoulder and groaning.

"Mine," said Duo.

A black shape materialized between Wufei and the recovering thug. The man was jerked upright and slammed against the nearest vat. As an afterthought, the red scarf he'd been wearing was ripped away from his face.

"Hmm. Seen this guy around before. Not part of Ravachol's regulars. Maybe a merc. You got balls, man," Duo added to his captive, "coming to Recyc just because somebody paid you."

The man made a move, then doubled over Duo's fist in his stomach.

"I wasn't done talking," Duo told him pleasantly, grabbing him by the throat to straighten him again. "Though if you want to spill your boss's name, I'm all ears."

The thug was scrabbling at the tightening grip around his neck, but he still managed a defiant scowl. Then his hand darted towards his belt.

Duo sent the com unit flying with one swift cut of his free hand. "I guess that's a 'no, Mr Maxwell, I'd rather you hurt me bad'. Fair enough. You'll be glad to hear I'll let you live, though."

The man didn't look all that thankful. He was choking and slowly turning red.
"You're gonna give your boss a message from me." Duo's fingers eased around the throat as he leaned forward. Wufei was keeping a lookout a few feet away, but he pricked his ears up to hear. "You tell him: this is Freeport. This is my home. And I don't like mysterious paramilitary groups murdering people and running around like they own the place. No sir. That has what you might call 'bad connotations' for me. Tell your boss that he's made a big mistake. He just went to war with the wrong person. You tell him that. Or not, if you're too scared. I'll be telling him myself soon enough if you don't. Good night."

Duo's short vicious punch sent the man's head smashing back into the vat. The thug's eyes rolled up into their sockets and he slumped from Duo's hold.

"He might have told us who their boss is," Wufei objected, absently cleaning his sword with a red scarf he'd picked up.

"No. No, I don't think he would've." Duo was looking down at the unconscious man thoughtfully. "I've seen that face before...and I don't think he's a mercenary. This 'boss' must have very loyal followers if they're willing to follow him all the way here...Come on, let's get out."

Easier said than done. Wufei and Duo stared at each other over the fallen man's body. They could hear shouts all around them, the pursuers getting close.

Wufei felt the blood flow through his veins, the speeding of his heart. It wasn't fear, it was anticipation. The men hunting them were cowards, spineless weaklings, but they had numbers on their side by the sound of it. That made it interesting. Wufei lived for Justice, but deep within his soul, he knew he was only truly alive in these moments, when the slow tread of the law gave way to the immediate cut of the sword. When doubts could - had to be put aside, and the present was as thin and steely as a knife's edge.

Duo was grinning like a God of Death. "Feel like going out the hard way?"

"There's an easy way?" Wufei asked sardonically without needing an answer.

"That's two each then, right?" Duo added wolfishly, nodding at the felled thugs. "Not counting that last one, since we both worked him over."

"Two...?"

"Best man wins."

Wufei stared at the hand extended towards him and remembered why Duo's words sounded familiar. The Lunar base. Two fifteen-year-olds still groggy from oxygen deprivation in a compound full of armed enemies. But that was only the surface of things. The real truth, the one that distinguished between life and death, was that they were two ageless killers in a base full of uniformed sheep who thought they were wolves.

He also remembered the stuck-up little brat he'd been back then turning his back contemptuously on Duo's extended hand. At the time, Wufei had just wanted to get himself and his new Gundam away from the Lunar base, and away from this doubtful ally who didn't seem to take anything very seriously.

But five years and a serious amount of history and distance separated those two moments in time. Duo's eyebrows twitched in surprise as Wufei gripped the hand extended towards him.

"The hard way," Wufei agreed. "And this time I'm actually counting mine; you won't be able to claim a false victory by default, Maxwell."
"I won back then, Chang, and I'll win this time too," Duo chuckled, his eyes gleaming with amusement and murderous fervor. Wufei didn't find this strange or contradictory anymore. The word that flitted through his mind, before the lust for battle turned the world into black and white still-frames full of targets, was 'intoxicating'.

Wufei's feet rang down the corridor just as the men passed near the darkened door at the halfway mark. The four men in the hallway froze for a second in sheer disbelief that they were being charged by a single attacker. Then one lifted a crossbow. Wufei zigzagged faster than the man's jittery aim. Only four more steps-

The man at the back of their formation screamed, a high-pitched burbling noise. Duo must have slit his victim's esophagus to produce that kind of god-awful noise.

The crossbow jerked and wavered- Wufei's sword blurred, his whole body behind the strike, through the shooter's shoulder all the way across the body. Thank you for the distraction, Duo.

Two men left.

Wufei's sword sliced at the second crossbow that had wobbled, hesitating between two deadly targets. The man screamed and jerked away from the pain. The crossbow and most of his forearm hit the metal floor. Wufei punched him across the face with the heel of his free hand, and spun, sword ready.

The last man twitched, eyes and tongue bulging, a black stain spreading down the legs of his dark overalls. Wufei glanced at the dagger that had pierced the back of the man's skull, and at the grin behind it.

"Mine," said Duo.

"Then that's four each," Wufei concluded, because at this point the humor in the cold tally was just one more way of saying they were still alive and breathing. "No, don't." Duo had leaned towards one of Wufei's victims to tear off the red scarf and see who they were dealing with, but they didn't have the time-

A gasp at the far end of the corridor, and then the sound of a catch releasing.

Wufei threw himself sideways, strong-arming Duo against the wall in the same movement. But he felt the body against his jerk, the sound of cloth tearing.

With a strength that surprised even him, he hauled Duo across the corridor into the small maintenance room in which Duo had lain in ambush earlier.

His hands were rough as they turned Duo over to get a look.

"M'okay!" Duo gasped. "Just a nick."

Wufei's fingers fastened around an arrow shaft, but it wasn't stuck in Duo's flesh, only in the leather coat. He ripped it out absently and threw it to the ground.
"We have them! We have them cornered!" The strained shout echoed from up the hallway beyond the door. "I shot one of them! I shot one of them!"

Duo glanced up at Wufei, who mouthing 'two'. His hand was still feeling Duo's back, a warm wet stain spreading under his fingers; he noted the smuggler flinch. But Duo stood up the next second, moving smoothly. Minor injury.

"Tor?!" Another voice. The second man, unless more reinforcements had arrived. "Tor, we have four guys down over here! Where are you?!"

Duo and Wufei glanced at each other and then at the wide ventilation shaft above them. The grimy aluminum hood, easily removed, ran from the ceiling of the small room, through a filter and into the walls on either side. It would open in numerous grids in the wall, one of them behind their enemy's back.

"I'm too broad in the shoulders," Wufei whispered.

"That's from working out like the health freak you are," Duo countered, slipping out of the leather coat. "Hold this for me, willya?"

There could be more on their way - you're hurt- I'm the one who should be taking the risks-...In the black and white world they inhabited, that sort of objection had no weight. There was only one way, one path. Despite his anxiety as he watched Duo's hips wriggled into the opened shaft, Wufei felt a strange sort of calm, a dark joy. Having no choices to make was liberating. He kept an ear out for reinforcements as the men shouted in their communicators, sword ready in one hand, the leather coat carefully in the other; he waited, listening to his heart beating, feeling the air move through his lungs, each moment unique while he still lived and fought against the odds...

A clang: a grid being loosened further down the corridor. Wufei burst out of the door with a war cry, effectively distracting the two dead men twenty feet away.

Mishmash of images. He was...on L2-X953...The terrorist base. He had to get out, the riot squad would be attacking soon-...

"Wu?"

Duo? Duo hadn't been there...

Wufei shook his head. The resulting flare of pain cleared out the confusion quite effectively.

"You okay?"

Duo was leaning an elbow against a pipe, legs wide, other hand braced against his thigh; the posture spoke of fatigue. Recyc, they were in Recyc with a small army after them. How long-...?

"I'm okay."

"You sure? You look like you blacked out there for a sec."

Wufei blinked the fuzziness from his eyes and shook his head again, a bit more gently. He was
sitting down on a floor made of metal grids. Something warm and gummy mired his hand to the metal. He stood up slowly, feeling his balance. His stomach was tight and cramped and his scalp burned and bled where the cudgel had cuffed him, but he didn't think he was concussed.

"You sure you're-"

"I'm fine," Wufei grunted. "It's Tuesday today, in case you wanted to ask."

"And Relena Peacecraft is President, don't remind me. Come on, I hear more coming."

The news meant nothing to Wufei, neither did the bodies he stepped over to move to Duo's side. A warrior lived only in the now, and for as long as the next sword cut.

"That's seven for me and six for you," said Duo. He was shaking his left arm, loosening the fingers around the hilt of his serrated knife.

"That's seven all around and you damn well know it."

"Just checking," Duo chirped with an endearing grin. Blasted adrenaline junkie was enjoying this way too much.

Wufei felt his face, stiff with blood and drying sweat, crack into a gruesome smile. It was... good to be with someone who knew the dark joy of the warrior's path, who understood the purity of battle, and who treated death about as seriously as a giant game of poker with marked cards.

"Which way now?" he said, focusing.

"This way." Duo headed down one of the corridors without any hesitation. Wufei followed, rubbing the sore patch above his ear. That had been close; he'd twitched his sword up towards the source of danger that had suddenly appeared behind him, and the man had impaled himself on it after clocking Wufei. They'd fallen together, but only one had risen.

Their enemies knew that he and Duo were slaughtering them. They'd grouped up into stronger units. The next fight would probably be the last, one way or another.

Wufei glanced at Duo. There was a lot he wanted to tell him, some things he should confess. But now was not the time. He'd apologize to Duo afterwards, either outside the doors of Recyc or before the gates of Hell.

Duo was smiling. It was strangely cheerful. He walked lightly, like a fifteen-year-old. Wufei blinked away the vision of a priest's collar and rubbed his eyes.

Somebody shouted behind them and they broke into a run, the predators turned prey once more.

The pounding pace hurt his head with each jolt, but the pain was just one more sign of life. There was a beautiful clarity to the whole situation. Kill or be killed. No laws, no rules. Simple. The men they were hunting were out of their reach, but their pawns were all about them, and lying dead or wounded behind them.

It wasn't such a bad day after all.
Wufei felt a sneeze working its way through his sinuses. Considering their present position, it would be a rather deadly reaction to dust.

"Shit, Tor, we have to split up! We'll never find them!"

The words echoed around the metal and the shadows, twisting into cryptic vowels and consonants.

Tor's answer was too muffled to make out, but it didn't sound enthusiastic at the idea of dividing their numbers.

"Tor, Amy says there's a dozen Trolls heading this way," announced another voice.

The enemy was about fourteen strong. Four of them were at a crossroad nearby, while the rest hunted through the mazes of machinery that was the water processing plant. They were all staying within shouting distance of each other, and they were between the fugitives and the exit, according to Duo's blue-prints. Somebody had spotted Wufei and Duo dodging into the plant, but the man had been smart and waited for the others to catch up instead of following the two killers into the shadows and meeting sudden death.

"They could be fucking anywhere. We're not going to find them."

That's it. Give up. Go away.

"You want to tell that to the boss? They killed our own, Saro."

There was some complaining, the exact words lost in further echoes as they both moved away.

Wufei and Duo were squashed in the narrow space between a tall machine and the ceiling. It was good thing they were both fairly small. This spot had probably not been cleaned since it had been built. Dust, grime and oil were slowly mixing with his sweat to cement Wufei to the unit. His tired muscles were stiffening and his various lumps and bruises were beginning to sting.

Wufei didn't like this strategy, but in the world of the hunter and prey, it was a good one; hiding conserved their energy while the foe wasted theirs. To find them up here, their enemies would have to search very thoroughly. To do that, they'd have to split up into smaller groups, because they were already running out of time in hostile territory. If they split up, Wufei and Duo would take them out one by one. Wufei gripped his sword, controlled his bodily reaction to the dust by sheer strength of will, and waited.

Distant arguing, followed by sudden shouts. Running feet; the sounds of steel-capped shoes on metal and a funny shuffling sound. Wufei remembered the rubber boots the Trolls wore. He glanced at Duo.

"Time to vamoose," his ally confirmed.

They dropped from the top of the machine, filthy as demons, silent as ghosts. The enemy was still in the plant, but from the sounds of running and distant struggling, they had other things to worry about.

Now to get away from their hunters and the natives.

"Whatever you do, don't kill any Trolls," Duo hissed, walking cat-like towards the nearest exit.

"I'll do my best," Wufei muttered, as the shadow of a hooded, rounded creature waving a club was projected briefly on a distant wall.
"Hey!"

They broke into a run without even glancing back at whoever had shouted. Duo dodged around a coil of pipes higher than either of them and Wufei followed. They ran, swift and silent. Speed would save them now. They didn't break a step when they burst through the door out of the plant.

Two men beyond that with red scarves but no rubber clothes or hats-

Duo was already on the first man, knife blade a murderous blur ending in his victim's throat. Wufei sliced the trembling crossbow aiming at his friend out of its wielder's hands and slammed the blunt edge of his blade into the shooter's stomach. Then they were running again, their pace barely broken.

Two more corridors. Duo was no longer looking at the blueprints on his handheld; either he'd memorized them while they were hiding, or he was homing on instinct.

Three Inner Trolls stood at a console in a long room where four machine-tools were filling and sealing barrels. They glanced up, amazed, at the door that had crashed open. Wufei and Duo raced right past them without a glance. Shouts behind them, drowned by the clamor of their boots as they thundered over a hollow section of the floor.

The sounds of pursuit were fading. Their enemy had more than two young men to worry about now. Ahead of Wufei, Duo slowed down and started running more quietly, stopping near intersections and checking ahead.

He opened a door carefully, stepped out onto some stairs leading down and froze, his hand thrown out in a gesture of caution. Wufei moved right up to his side anyway, ready for one last fight.

They were at the top of a flight of metal stairs at the far end of a huge hangar full of barrels and crates, some as large as a house. Supplies for Recyc. Wufei didn't know the layout, but functionality dictated that this was an exit point to the place. They'd made it out.

At the other end of the large hangar was a door with two figures near it. They'd removed the red scarves. Even across that distance, Wufei could make out Ferret's rodent face, red and twisted with vehemence. Which was odd; Ferret hadn't even spotted Wufei and Duo yet. It was hard to tell across the length of the hangar, but Wufei thought that anger was directed at Carver.

Ferret hadn't noticed them, but Carver had. The killer had turned in his tracks at the same time Duo's hand had shot out to hold Wufei back. Carver was staring straight at them, his machete in his hand.

Neither Carver nor Ferret looked like they were armed with projectile weapons, though Wufei hung back, ready to jerk Duo into the protection of the doorway if Carver made any suspicious move. His eyes drilled into the distant assassin. With the cold clarity of battle, he'd already calculated the distance between them. If Ferret and Carver wanted to run, they'd be on the streets and out of harm's way before Wufei and Duo could get halfway across the hangar.

Ferret followed Carver's stare and did a double-take that was visible all the way across the large room as he spotted Wufei and Duo. Then he was out the door like a shot. Carver stayed where he was for a few seconds, staring at Wufei. Then he turned his back to them and left, at a speed that clearly indicated he wasn't particularly worried about either of them.

"Bugger," Duo stated neutrally. He'd have measured the distance between them and the killer at the same time as Wufei and come to the same conclusion.

Wufei grunted in agreement. He noted that Duo's voice was weaker than usual. Almost two hours had passed since Carver's machete had nearly beheaded Wufei, and they'd been fighting, running
and hiding continuously since. They were both tired. Physically, they were in no shape to catch up and defeat Carver now. It was surprising they’d even caught up with the man at all; he must have hung back for some reason.

"Herb wasn't with them", Wufei noted.

"Maybe he broke away in the confusion." Duo's voice was indifferent. He was still walking in the shadow of the valley of death; the only life he'd care about at this point would be his own. His own and Wufei's. Left hand, right hand, one unit...Wufei felt the tender lump near his ear, trying to clear the confusion and strange thoughts drifting through his mind without shaking his sore head.

"Did you notice...?" Duo made a gesture towards his throat.

"Yes."

"Yeah...Well, you learn something new every day."

Tomorrow, Wufei would be a Preventer again. Tomorrow he'd remember the slaughter, the dead and the wounded he'd left in his wake, and remember the dark pleasure he'd taken in their death and his own survival. He would meditate on it and accept it once more as a part of himself. He would feel pity for the deceased as if they'd been victims of a forest fire, an avalanche, some random act of God. They'd stood in the way of something more dangerous than they could understand. They'd fallen. He had survived. End of story.

Tomorrow he would start thinking logically again and at that point he was going to wonder why the silent Carver had been wearing a Blade's collar around his neck, like a strange, warped reflection of Wufei's own image.
"Existence well what does it matter?  
I exist on the best terms I can.  
The past is now part of my future,  
The present is well out of hand.  
The present is well out of hand.  

Heart and soul, one will burn.  
Heart and soul, one will burn.  
One will burn, one will burn.  
Heart and soul, one will burn."

- Joy Division, 'Heart and Soul'

The water burst out of the showerhead with a furious hiss. Duo slung his leather coat over a nearby pipe and stepped under the flow. Wufei shrugged off his jacket and joined him. His clothes were immediately soaked and the water ran unpleasantly down the inside of his pants. It was cold and stank of alkali. The flow pummeled them, biting into whatever skin was exposed. They'd found the emergency shower near the exit of Recyc's chemical storage hangar, a first line measure of aid for chemical spills or acid burns. Wufei sheltered his eyes and watched as the water reddened Duo's pale face. It probably wasn't doing the braided hair any good either, but at least it would get the blood off. He closed his eyes again, the chemical mist was making them sting.

They wiped off the clots from their coats with Duo's wet shirt, and wrung themselves out as well they could. Wufei checked the cut on Duo's lower back; it wasn't deep. It would be the long leather coat that would require a few stitches, not Duo's hide.

As Wufei turned away, Duo, without a word, caught his elbow and hauled him back under the raw light of the hangar's dirty neon. He tilted Wufei's head and felt around the lump near his ear. Satisfied, he jerked his chin towards the exit nearby. They walked out looking like two drowned rats, but better that than the perpetrators of a massacre.

The Preventer's duty was a distant, niggling annoyance. It dictated they should warn the authorities, get the bodies recovered, bring help to the survivors before arresting them if at all possible, and then hunt down those who had escaped. But Wufei ignored it. The Preventer was not what had gotten them out alive today. Wufei had had to uncover a part of himself he'd cultivated during the war and tightly controlled since then; a killer of Carver's caliber. The same wildness lingered in Duo's eyes. They had to go home, safe territory where they could hunker down and let this dangerous mood dissipate. Now was not the time to attempt anything constructive.

They walked away from Recyc without a word, alert for further attack they did not really expect. Their enemy had won this round, but had taken quite a blow in return; each side would retire and lick their wounds, and tomorrow the hunt would be on again. Wufei thought of two hard brown eyes, colder than death, and felt a frisson of anticipation.

They didn't take the shuttle, sticking to the back alleys that had become their haunts and highways. One sector, two sectors...the adrenaline and the anger and the dark thrilling freedom still coursed through Wufei's veins. Three sectors. Four. A shortcut down into the lower level to take a freight
carrier through the underbelly of the colony, jumping off at Makhno.

They emerged like demons from a trapdoor below the level. Wufei could feel the chemicals and the leftover blood drying in his hair; it swung into his face as he walked, spiky and harsh.

Duo looked around his home sector as if he didn't recognize it.

"That was eight each if I didn't lose count," he suddenly said.

"Eight. Yes."

"Fuckers just had to come in pairs."

"I still say that I got that extra one at the start, the one you interrogated." The cold tally was automatic, all part of the joke that was life and death.

"That one didn't count," Duo argued.

"Then we're even."

"First one back wins it then."

Wufei stared open-mouthed at Duo's back six feet away and accelerating, the black coat flapping like dark wings.

"Maxwell! You dishonorable cur!" he barked, breaking into a run, pursuing a burst of breathless taunting laughter.

They pounded through the alleys, jumping over yard enclosures, clambering over chain link fences and junkyard contents, avoiding civilians in the self-imposed obstacle course. In the distance women talked, children played; it was the middle of the day in Makhno. Darkness and murder ran on in the shadows, far from the reach of everyday life.

Wufei didn't lose sight of Duo as they ran past the writings high up on the sector wall, but he could see the huge letters as if they were printed in the air in front of him.

'Only my freedom.'

His heart pounded as he chased the darting black shape, braid dancing like a war banner.

'Do what you want if you think you've earned it'

He could feel every inch of his body, the sensual trickles of sweat down his back, the unbound hair whipping his face, every nerve singing a fierce pagan hymn to the pleasure of having survived and paid in blood those who had tried to kill them.

'Live now. Tomorrow we die.'

Duo slammed into the backyard door- he didn't have time for a breath, Wufei piled right into him.

"I won!" Duo huffed.

"Didn't." Words and gasps blended, melded with Duo's hurried breathing. "You cheated."

Duo's hands were hard as they grabbed his arms, swung him around and pinned him against the door.
"I won," Duo purred, and kissed him fiercely.

Live now. Tomorrow we die.

Wufei's fingers caught in thick hair, yanking carelessly at loose strands. The sensation made Wufei's heart pound as hard as when they had been racing.

Duo's hands were on his ass, pressing their groins together. Wufei dug into the open mouth with his tongue. He got nipped by a sharp pair of teeth for his efforts. The darting flash of pain hardened him as much as Duo's rough movements.

His fingers tugged relentlessly at the brown hair, forcing Duo's head to a better angle, giving him control of the kiss. Duo retaliated and pressed him harder against the door. The back of Wufei's skull met hard metal, while his lips were painfully caught against Duo's teeth. Wufei's right hand ripped free of Duo's hair; a wince ran through the body plastered to his. He gripped a shoulder...the will to shove Duo away faded under the sensual feel of cool leather beneath his fingertips contrasting violently with the warm mouth taking his.

Duo tore his face away and leaned past Wufei to punch in the security code to the door with unnecessary force. The keypad beeped the 'Incorrect Code' signal and Duo whined under his breath and fumbled at the keys again. No longer so badly pressed into the door, Wufei's fingers ran from Duo's shoulder to the back of the neck and the skin beneath his collar, fingernails trailing over damp flesh.

The door fell open and they staggered in. Duo kicked it shut without looking and shoved Wufei before him. Wufei was ready to go down right there in the junkyard, but Duo hauled on his wrist and staggered towards the door to the apartment. There was a bed in there, Wufei remembered, and shoved Duo onwards.

They stumbled like dangerous drunks up the steps. Duo managed to slip the key into the lock without breaking it, and they fetched up against the workbench, the door swinging shut idly behind them.

Wufei spun them around and cornered the warm, lithe body against the worktable. Duo fought back immediately, bucking and pushing. Their bodies dragged against each other as they struggled silently, mouths nipping and touching more by chance than design. The workbench rattled and something fell over with a metallic thump.

Wufei flexed his muscles, blood singing through them, his skin so sensitive that the rub of his jacket's zipper against his chest was torture. He relaxed and let himself be pinned against the table. A hard thigh shoved his legs apart and pressed up slowly against his erection, making his knees tremble.

At the back of his mind, behind the adrenaline and the blood they'd shed and the desire burning through his veins, a calm, cold voice was listing all the reasons why this was a Very Bad Idea, but he wanted it too badly. He wanted to feel this darkness that matched his own; he wanted to touch that lust for death and life that wasn't ashamed of itself.

Wufei broke the crude strap holding the sword on his back with a couple of frustrated jerks. The scabbard hit the workbench with a thud. He struggled out of his jacket, getting no help from the body still crammed against his so closely he had no room to maneuver. The jacket caught his arms, trapped his hands behind his back. He jerked at it, frustration igniting underlying tension. Before he could snap and fight his way free from all constrictions, Duo's hand left the hip it had been mauling, reached behind Wufei and jerked the jacket off. The hand then stuffed itself up his shirt, fingertips dragging across sensitive skin along his lower back, his ribs. Wufei relaxed marginally, and flexed
his hips to rub against the thigh between his legs, his hands fisting in the leather over Duo's taut shoulders.

Duo was talking, soft, panted words. They sounded harried, not quite as self-assured as he seemed. "Sixty nine? Go down on ya, it'll be good."

Hell no. Wufei's body knew what it wanted, and it wanted it far too badly to be satisfied with anything less. But he could only groan.

The body against his leaned back a bit, easing up on the pressure nailing him to the workbench. He heard the clink of Duo's belt buckle. Wufei hauled the leather coat off of Duo's shoulders. Duo's fingers slipped from the belt, caught in the folds of leather.

The want was so big it was beginning to alarm him. It had never been able to blaze so freely, it had never met someone who could match him blow for blow and stroke for stroke. His usual control was scattered, and that feeling excited him even more.

"Lube?" he gasped, trying to focus on basics while he still could.

"No," Duo growled. No, he didn't have any? Or no- Duo shrugged off the coat. It fell to the ground with a heavy thump. Wufei's hands touched bare flesh where the wet t-shirt rode up, the skin peppered with small hairs that tickled his fingertips. Smooth, hard muscle beneath, live and tense, solid and male and strong-

"Do you-...have any-"

"No," Duo said again, the word hot against Wufei's throat. Then fingers ripped off Wufei's shirt and t-shirt together - the air harsh and cold against his still-damp skin - and he was forced back against the bench. Something rolled off the surface and fell to the floor, and what felt like a spanner dug into Wufei's buttocks.

"Duo-"

Hands grabbed his wrists. Wufei tugged, but he was overbalanced backwards on the bench, no leverage. His hands were slammed into the wall behind him, bending him back further. Duo's body trapped his legs against the edge of the worktable.

The light of a streetlamp cut through the blinds of the window next to them, cutting Duo's features into a barbaric black and white mask. The cheerful persona still hadn't reasserted itself after the bloodshed. Wufei was looking at Shinigami. Cruelty and strength, passion and determination, graveyard humor, lust for life and a primal hunger.

"Sorry, Chang." The words were hard, whispered against his lips. "Maybe I'm nothin' but a fucking spacer street-rat, but I don't bend over for nobody."

The words weren't making sense, except that it seemed there was some kind of obstacle and Wufei didn't want any. Obstacles meant thinking, and if he started thinking he'd never go through with this.

"I don't care who you think you are, Maxwell, I don't let anybody fuck me dry. Now do - you - have -"

His hands were suddenly released, the pressure against his body gone. Wufei managed to catch himself before sliding further backwards and cracking his head against the wall.

"You're letting me-...do you?" Duo asked as if he suspected a trick.
"That's what I said!" Wufei snapped, then paused. Actually he hadn't said it, he'd just asked for lube.

"You sure?" Duo's tone was sarcasm edged with blades. "I don't think you let gene-trash like me mount the likes of you, Lord Chang."

Wufei didn't fully register the words, the tone and the implication were enough to jar him out of his single-minded lust and into a more familiar anger; that tone did not belong in this moment born of blood spilled and the dark fire burning between them.

"You seem to be suffering under some kind of misconception, Maxwell."

Wufei's hand slipped over Duo's chest and down to the solid mass between Duo's legs. Blue eyes hooded and Duo licked his lips as the fingers stroked.

"I'm allowing you to top because I happen to prefer it that way. Tell me..."

Duo gasped and flinched as Wufei's fingers suddenly squeezed. Hard.

"Does that make me less in your eyes if I let you screw me? Less of a man, maybe? Do you think this is some kind of submission?"

Duo swallowed carefully. For an instant his eyes flashed, feral and cautious - 'street rat' - but then he laughed, a dark chuckle that didn't move any part of his body below his shoulders, and it was the familiar Duo again.

"I can be pretty damn stupid, handsome, but that stupid I'm not."

"No pet names."

"Okay...boss..." the words were breathed against his lips as Duo cautiously leaned forward. "How about letting go now? I'm gonna need that in a minute."

"This is just sex, Maxwell. Nothing more, nothing less. Take it or leave it."

"Oh, I'll definitely take it," Duo whispered into his mouth. "And it will be sex, no strings attached. But 'just' sex...? Nuh huh."

Wufei's mouth was crushed shut by a brutal kiss before he could answer. His hand shaped itself more gently around the hardness in his palm. It thrust against his fingers, tentatively at first, then hard, as Duo's tongue forced Wufei's lips to open. Wufei twisted his legs free from the weight of Duo's body. He leaned back, sitting more fully on the workbench, and wrapped them around a tight ass flexing into his hand - the play of muscles, the promise of it, lit the fire again and consumed him.

"Ouch," Duo muttered, pulling away and licking the small teeth mark on his lower lip. "Lemme guess, you a biter?"

"We never did determine whether you have any lubricant," Wufei growled. Duo smelled of chemicals, sweat and blood, the heat from his skin making the scents overwhelming.

"I got some-" Duo started to say and staggered back under Wufei's hard shove.

"Then go and get it, and we do this on the bed."

"Yes boss," Duo snickered, walking stiffly towards the small sink, his hands jerking at his belt again.

Wufei bent forward to unlace his boots. Far in the back of his mind, the list of ways this was going to
blow up in his face kept scrolling by, and it meant absolutely nothing. The part of him that cared had been left behind in Recyc where it wouldn't hinder him as he hacked their way out. Wufei was still in the grip of battle. He wanted to feel alive. He wanted the freedom that came of having only one choice. Here and now, his body screaming, his mind blunted by blood and fighting fever, he wanted to believe he had no other choice than to act on the desires that had been piling up like dead regrets for the past two months. He could take this if he wanted to, and if Duo was willing. This decision was theirs and theirs alone, nobody else could be hurt or affected by it, and so really, it was no decision at all...

His wild musings - hardly even thought - were brusquely interrupted. He started; he was standing in the middle of the room with his pants undone, the only piece of clothing he had left. A hand was waving a small plain bottle in front of his eyes with 'EZ (anal lubricant)' on its label, and Duo was asking "Does this stuff come with an expiry date?"

Wufei started to laugh uncontrollably. A mood-breaker of major proportions in other circumstances, but it didn't matter here; there was no proper attitude to maintain, no planning, no schedule, there were no limits and no barriers and he could do whatever he wanted to in this singular moment...

"You're fucking gorgeous when you laugh," Duo murmured, his grin hungry.

Wufei was tackled to the bed, still laughing and breathless.

"If you're going to change your mind, now's the time to do it," Duo said.

"I could say the same to you," Wufei countered, still gasping.

"True. Lemme see."

Fingers gripped the edge of his pants and peeled them off slowly.

Duo had switched on the kitchen neon. It was shining at his back as he straightened up, one knee on the bed besides Wufei's legs. His gaze traveled over Wufei's body like a caress. Wufei leaned back and let Duo take him with his eyes. The stare passed unhindered over his scars, the ruined remains of his left nipple and the ragged edge of grafted skin over his pectoral. Duo had already seen the worst of him.

Wufei's eyes explored every inch of the other body in turn. Duo had ditched his clothes at some point. The body Wufei had glimpsed that first day - and then spent weeks guessing at under tight pants and t-shirts - was there before him, fully revealed. New bruises decorated the arms and legs making his skin look even paler, and a trace of watered-down grime painted a line down his sternum. He held himself stiffly; the cut on his back must be burning in the cold air.

Wufei wanted to take his time admiring the play of muscles - not as developed as his own, but wiry and strong as steel cables - but his eyes kept dipping down to what he hadn't been able to see till now. Duo's cock was one more hard line on his body, flushed at its uncut tip, red against his otherwise pale skin and brown hair. Wufei realized he was spreading his legs already at the sight of it, and reined himself in. Duo hadn't answered.

"Well?" he rapped out. He didn't have to pretend, didn't have to act gently or seduce, Duo knew him, he'd seen Wufei's tightly controlled mask and the killer beneath, and was no more repulsed by it than by the scarred body.

Duo scratched his nose, his eyes twinkling as they made another slow pass over Wufei's body. "What was the question again?"
"If you'd changed your mind, idiot."

"Nope," Duo drawled. "Nope, can't say I have."

"Lube," Wufei ordered, waving his hand.

"You always this bossy in bed?"

"Yes," Wufei answered tartly, which got him a chuckle. Duo picked up the lube from the floor where he'd dropped it, as well as a foil-wrapped disk, and crawled onto the bed.

Wufei uncapped the lube and poured some on his fingers with total disrespect for Duo's sheets and cover. He was in a hurry. Fatigue was trying to slow him down. His limbs felt heavy as the adrenaline leached slowly out of his system. That little voice of reason was still making its dutiful objections...but the want burned under his skin and in his loins. His fingers were trembling with both aching lust and the start of counter-reaction. It had to be now.

Duo's eyes were incandescent as they followed the movement of his fingers. Those mobile lips were lax, open around short, sharp breaths. A tongue darted out over them. Duo's hands twitched.

"You want me to-"

"No," Wufei grunted, forcing himself to relax against the pressure of his fingers as he prepared himself. It wasn't easy. His body felt like a spring being slowly wound up, his muscles clenching and twitching with nerves. Now now now!

Duo licked his lips again and fumbled with the condom, nearly dropping it. His eyes were wild and too bright, his fingers were also shaking. Wufei dug deeper, probing and pushing at the muscles, willing himself to be ready. Tonight he had no patience with the flesh, with rituals, with foreplay and tame pleasures.

Duo had slipped on the condom, his fingers trailing along the plastic gingerly. He leaned forward over Wufei as the latter spread more lube in and around the muscles that were still resisting the pressure. Duo looked like he wanted to kiss him, touch him, but his eyes stayed riveted on Wufei's fingers, swirling and plunging deeper and faster-

"Now," Wufei hissed as the spring wound itself as tight as it was going to go. It was a wonder he could even breathe.

Duo seemed to shake himself out of a trance. A hand landed near Wufei's belly, making the mattress bounce, and the feel of plastic pressed against Wufei's ring of muscles, slipping and slithering away as it hit resistance and slickened skin. Wufei barely managed to roll onto his back - one of his legs was caught between their bodies as Duo grabbed his hips. Wufei felt blindly, reaching for Duo's cock and guiding it with his extended fingertips.

The thick uncut head pushed hard and sank in quickly. Duo's breath came out in a gasp.

"You-sure- you're- ready?" Each word punctuated a thrust, his body too eager to care about Wufei's comfort.

Wufei could feel every inch force its way in; it burned and stretched, and he wanted more. His free leg looped about Duo's hips, pressing him closer, arms thrown out for balance, scrabbling at the sheets, other leg stuck awkwardly-

That body, whip-taut and wiry, that darkness, that strength, that lust for life in him- the spring gave a
sickening lurch. Wufei screwed his eyes shut and held his breath, trying to keep himself in check.

Duo groaned breathlessly as he pulled out and forced himself in deeper. Wufei grit his teeth to avoid biting his tongue as the thrust shoved him helplessly across the sheets. He reached blindly, found the wall above his head and shoved back.

"Aah!" Duo choked the end of the cry. Warm skin and pressure against Wufei's thighs, and his anal muscles were tight with effort as his body shook with pleasure. The spring gave another shudder- not going to last-

Duo's body flexed. Out- small sharp pain. Wufei gasped, his eyes flying open. Duo pushed in hard against the resistance. He grunted and pulled out again immediately and Wufei's vision blurred. His heart hadn't slowed down since he'd looked up into Carver's eyes.

Visions of bloodshed and running and a thing of murderous beauty by his side killing and grinning - Wufei shouted as Duo's cock hammered into him again and his entire being centered around that and the muscles suddenly loosening with a rush of pure, unadulterated pleasure.

Duo chose that moment to stop moving, giving Wufei the heart attack that'd been coming on for awhile.

"You-okay-"

Wufei's answer wasn't intelligible even to his ears. His hands scrabbled at Duo's hips and ass, clawing and trying to force the obscenely motionless body into doing that movement again and never stopping.

A shudder ran through the body close to his own; the way Wufei had moved and jerked, and the sudden stress, had caused his muscles around Duo's cock to clench and grip. Duo groaned, a high sound like a creature in pain, and then he was moving again, hard and fast against the dwindling resistance. Wufei braced against the wall. His arms were buckling. Duo's muscles were flexing beneath Wufei's encircling leg and it was as good as he knew it would be...

The slamming motion shuddered and broke. Duo's erection was hot and pulsing in him. A hand on Wufei's hip gripped hard enough to bruise.

Wufei felt the coiled spring give, the throb of Duo's cock, sensation rippling up into him, running over sensitive inner skin. His fingers reached blindly for his erection. They were cold with lube. The shock/pleasure and the last small thrusts in his ass released the spring before it could rip him apart.

Duo stayed close, his arms wrapped awkwardly around Wufei's waist, his cock still deep and real within him as Wufei arched against the cover, fist slamming against the wall near his head.

The last of Wufei's strength burned out with the sharp pleasure that was fading to a pleasant, exhausted warmth. Panting, he blinked at the ceiling.

Duo sighed. A sweaty forehead touched Wufei's chest. A final wave of tired pleasure as Duo slowly pulled out. Crackle of plastic. Duo was breathing deeply, like a runner trying to force his breath back to normal after the race was won. Something landed in the garbage can near the desk with a wet noise.

Wufei realized his eyes were closed. He should get up. He really had to get up, though offhand he couldn't remember why. The words 'sleeping bag' were running through his mind without making much sense.

The sheets beneath his body were tugged away. Wufei curled his legs up instinctively, shifting his
weight. The covers settled over him, and there was a warm touch on his thigh.

"You okay?"

Wufei absently wiped his hand against the cover. "Yes."

His eyes had closed again. He could feel his heart beat slowing now, slowing for the first time in hours.

"Let's sleep." Duo's voice was a low rumble. The hand on Wufei's thigh squeezed slightly and then retreated.

We left the neon on in the kitchen, Wufei thought, a second before he blacked out.
"It's hard not to break down and cry when every ideal that you tried has been wrong and you must carry on

'Cause you, you are the only one left and you've got to clean up this mess, you know you'll end up like the rest bitter and twisted unless you stay strong and you carry on

It's hard, but you know it's worth the fight 'cause you know you've got the truth on your side when the accusations fly, hold tight don't be afraid of what they'll say who cares what cowards think anyway they will understand one day, one day one day..."

---Yann Tiersen, "Les Jours Tristes"

Wufei woke up and swiftly came to the conclusion that he wasn't fifteen any more.

He stifled a whimper because he was Chang Wufei, damnit. A drawn-out battle, a deadly pursuit up ladders and through tunnels, a footrace and a vigorous fuck were nothing to his trained body. Shit. Sally, I'd like 10cc of painkiller injected intravenously, or indeed anywhere you choose...

The smell of coffee tickled his nose. The machine gave its first percolating burp as Wufei struggled with awareness. The laptop hummed faintly in the background, a counterpoint to a crescendo of soft keystrokes. Wufei was alone in the bed.

He cracked his eyes open and closed them again with a wince. On top of every single aching muscle in his body, his head was throbbing, particularly around the lump near his ear.

A second attempt showed him that no, there wasn't a spotlight shining right on his face and searing his eyes. The neon in the kitchen was off; there was only the glow from the laptop's screen to illuminate the room, and some little white and blue flickers in Wufei's vision which cleared after he blinked a few times. Duo was a black shape slouching in a chair near the computer in the semi-darkness. He was fully dressed and wearing his long leather coat.

For some reason it was the Scissorman's coat, which Duo never wore inside the apartment, that triggered the memory. That and the way Duo had slowly leaned away from the laptop, obviously aware that Wufei was awake, but hadn't turned around.

'I don't think you let gene-trash like me mount the likes of you, Lord Chang'

A lot had happened in the past twenty-four hours, yet those words constituted the first memory that
jumped into Wufei's half-awake mind and stuck there like a splinter. What the hell had that been about? Duo often talked about his origins disparagingly, but there was always an underlying pride there, a steely self-confidence in his words: "This is what I am, this is where I came from, and it's made me tougher than you'll ever know".

Gene-trash... Yet the look in Duo's eyes had not been self-disgust or shame. For an instant Wufei had been looking at something cruel, fully self-aware, as dark and powerful as Duo's usual inner strength yet turned inwards, the negative to the positive... Wufei shook his head, trying to order his jumbled thoughts into something coherent, and lost the thread of intuition instead.

Duo had swiveled his chair around while Wufei was struggling with feelings about as firm and coherent as spider webs. The smuggler looked relaxed, grinning at Wufei tiredly. The dark rings under his eyes contrasted harshly with the pale spacer skin, and made Wufei think of a panda once more.

"If you don't feel like a Leo rolled right over you, then I hate your guts," Duo said, rubbing a shoulder with obvious pain.

Wufei felt the last trickle of that 'wrong' feeling disappear in the face of the evidence. Duo was giving Wufei's bare chest an appreciate look and a bit of a lustful leer. Apparently he had no regrets. And also more stamina than Wufei - whose libido was now firmly stuck at zero - could believe. Maybe there was nothing wrong with Duo at all. Maybe Wufei was concussed.

"Coffee should be ready in a minute," Duo threw over his shoulder as he turned back to the laptop again. "That should make us feel human again."

"We need juice or plain water to rehydrate ourselves. Caffeine will not help to flush out-"  

"You take away my coffee, man, even Recyc won't want your remains."

"Have you considered detox for your addiction, Max-" Wufei interrupted himself as his attempt to sit up and shove back the sheets ended in a thud and a re-acquaintance with the mattress. He steadied himself, wondering if he was in fact truly concussed, but the bout of dizziness passed as quickly as it'd knocked him down.

"It's surprisingly quiet out there..." Duo hadn't noticed Wufei's lapse. He was flipping through forums and the online Freeport bulletin boards. "The Trolls have been keeping the mess under wraps. They don't have much to do with us non-Trolls anyway, not until we kick the bucket- ah?"

There'd been a ping from the computer. Duo leaned forward, opening an email.

Wufei glanced at his watch. Three hours of sleep... no wonder he still felt mugged. He swung his legs slowly off the bed, moving all major muscle groups to make sure there was no permanent damage. His self-assessment was subject to distraction, however: the slide of the sheet over bare skin was reminding him of what had happened before their brief rest in vivid, X-rated details.

He waited for the guilt. It materialized right on cue, waving every item of the Very Bad Idea list. Yet it was only a pallid replica of the kind of self-flagellation Wufei was truly capable of. Despite the best efforts of his overactive scruples, Wufei couldn't fully regret that savage roll in the sheets. It had gotten to the point where resisting his unacknowledged attraction towards Duo was getting harder and more distracting than going with the flow, especially after those savage hours of battle and blood. Since Duo looked okay with it all... or so Wufei hoped... Why was Duo wearing that coat...? That coat was part of his Scissorman persona. It was a mask... Wufei couldn't put his finger on what was off. His brain felt as bruised as his body.
Maybe it was just Duo's way of putting distance between them. Duo didn't appear to have any regrets over sex in the heat of the moment, but that didn't mean he'd be looking for an encore. Wufei himself didn't know what he thought about that, but the notion of drawing that invisible line between them again failed to evoke much enthusiasm.

"A mail just came in," Duo announced briskly, leaning back in his chair with a squeak of ball joints.

"Cesar? Did he find Herb?" Wufei stood up as fluidly as he could, ignoring the stiffness of cold, abused muscles and the ache of the lump near his ear. It would get better if he moved.

"No, Cesar's not reported in yet. God only knows where Herb is. The email is from the Troll King."

"Their leader, I presume?"

"Yeah."

"What does he want?" Wufei focused on the here and now, and reached for his clothes. The scent of blood, chemicals and damp leather made him drop them with a wrinkled nose and go get fresh ones from his bag.

"He doesn't say, he just wants us to meet him."

"That doesn't sound good," Wufei grunted, pulling on a pair of thick docker pants Duo had lent him awhile back.

"It's fairly polite and non-threatening."

Wufei went to lean over Duo's shoulder to read. Duo swiveled a bit in the chair and reached towards Wufei's face; the Preventer started a bit, but let Duo part the hair and examine the lump near his ear. From the slight tug and sting as his bangs were pushed back, it must have bled some more during his sleep. Duo looked concerned but Wufei took no notice of it as he quickly read the message from some anonymous email address in Recyc sector. It was short and to the point.

'Maxwell, I know it was you. Get your ass over to the Barbieri entrance in the next six hours.' No signature.

Wufei turned sharply on Duo, who grinned. "Believe me, coming from the King, that is fairly polite and non-threatening."

"I'll go get my sword," Wufei muttered.

"How do we handle this?" Wufei asked. They'd cleared the busy shuttle platform in Barbieri sector and stepped into the two-block no-man's-land around Recyc; the Trolls didn't have any neighbors despite Freeport's crowded conditions. They walked through an empty area of ugly prefab warehouses, past a dusty terminal full of broken electric carts and through a wasteland of empty barrels, dirt and debris; even the feral cat population seemed to avoid the place. They could talk safely here.

"Apologize a lot to start with," Duo answered breezily.
"What if apologies aren't enough?"

"Do you believe in reincarnation?"

"No."

"Don't go making any plans then."

"Very amusing."

"It shouldn't come to that. The Trolls aren't that bad."

Wufei remembered their decorative use of human skulls, but didn't say anything.

"Once we've calmed down his Majesty, we'll see what the Trolls know about Herb. They were hiding him. They might have info about Ferret and Carver."

Wufei felt a prickle of alarm. "You're going to involve those lunatics in our investigation? That's pushing our luck. You should just go in, apologize, promise we'll never-"

"No, we got to keep on track." Duo's eyes narrowed predatorily. "I'm hoping my lil' message will get Carver & Co to act against us; give us a chance for a rematch."

"A chance to get killed, you mean."

"Nobody lives forever. But I don't plan on dying easy and neither do you. No, Carver's quite welcome to take a shot at us. But considering how secretive this gang is, it's more likely their boss will order the whole lot of them into hiding."

Wufei's footsteps slowed as if the dust rising around his boots was turning to quicksand. Duo was right. It would seem strange on the face of it to hide from only two people, but if the Boss knew Duo's reputation - if the Boss was Ravachol for instance - then he would know that appearances could be deceiving. If they lost Carver's trace now, they might not pick it up again. But...

Duo was a few feet ahead now, talking animatedly. "We need all the leads we can get. I might be able to track the gang and their boss down later, now that I know they exist, but if Carver leaves the colony, you'll lose him for good even if I corner his friends here. He won't be dumb enough to come back here while you're around. That's why- Wu? What are you lagging behind for?"

Duo's boots scuffled dirt as he took a couple of steps back towards Wufei. "Yo, Colony to daydreaming space debris, come in."

"Duo, just go in there and apologize," Wufei ordered, gaze dropping blindly to a rusty barrel lying on its side in the debris at his feet. "Play it safe. It's not worth it."

"What about the mission?"

"The mission is a lie."

Silence. When angry accusations failed to materialize, Wufei glanced up at his friend. Duo was
looking back at him with, against all expectations, a look of grim satisfaction on his face. Wufei almost wondered if Duo had heard him correctly, but he’d spoken quite clearly and there was nothing wrong with the smuggler's ears.

Duo rubbed his nose, giving Wufei a piercing look. "Does Trowa even know you're here?"

Wufei had expected a lot of things - questions, accusations and a lot of shouting - but not that. "What!?"

"Trowa. Was he the one who actually sent me the signal to meet at Hilde’s and take-"

"Of course! You think I'd come to this pit if I wasn't ordered to?"

Oh, way to go, Chang. First tell the man you've been lying to him all along, then insult his home. Good job.

"Why aren't you even surprised?" Wufei asked, rubbing his face savagely. His head had started to throb again, his blood pulsing in his injured temple.

"I don't know." Duo still sounded remarkably calm. "You wrap yourself up pretty damn tight. Not as bad as Heero, but close. The thing is, I've survived this long by being able to read people. I had the feeling something was up."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"Because it was just a feeling," Duo answered with a self-deprecating shrug. "And I know I can be bloody paranoid at times. I wasn't sure. And I thought-..." He rubbed the back of his neck. "I was thinking maybe you bluffed your way onto Freeport to hunt down Carver for your own reasons. Personal justice, like."

Wufei's jaw dropped.

"You do seem to really want to get the bastard," Duo added as an explanation. "I always pegged you as the kind of guy who'd go to the bottom of hell and back to get payback over something serious."

That remark was probably pretty accurate, but..."I never saw Carver until a few hours ago. He's done nothing to me, he-...he's nothing..."

The full import of Duo's words was slowly crushing him. Duo had known something was up; Wufei must have betrayed himself in a dozen small ways, living with the other man for so long. Duo had felt something wasn't right, but he'd said nothing. He'd trusted Wufei. The smuggler had even helped him, at considerable risk to himself, because he thought that Carver had wronged Wufei in some way.

Wufei turned around and sank down blindly to sit on the empty barrel, slipping his sword's strap over his head when the bottom of the scabbard scraped on the rusty metal. His back was towards Duo. Wufei had never wanted to feel like a coward, but he couldn't face his friend at this point.

"So what is this all about?" Duo was finally beginning to sound angry and suspicious. "Why'd you say Carver's nothing? He didn't murder those kids?"

"Oh, he did," Wufei answered numbly, settling his sheathed sword between his legs, the metal tip of the scabbard resting in the dirt. "And for that reason he was designated a class B criminal, with a little memo in his file that he might be willing to sell us a few terrorists as a plea bargain if we ever caught him." Trowa had done some bureaucratic magic to get Carver reassigned as A, but it was a
"Class B? Specials only take on Class A cases. What are you really doing here, Chang?" Footsteps
and then a small shock through the barrel. Duo's foot had landed on it hard; it would have rolled if
Wufei's weight hadn't anchored it. Wufei didn't have to look to know that Duo was looming over
him, angry and menacing. Wufei accepted the hostility as his due. "Did you guys know about Ferret?
Is that it? Have you been hunting this secret organization all along?"

"No, strangely enough," Wufei sighed. "We honestly thought Carver was just a paid hitman. His
association with Ferret is a surprise to us, one that surely intrigues Trowa greatly. But Trowa would
not have sent me after Carver if he'd known about that; it's developed into a high-risk situation, and I
was not supposed to put either of us in any danger."

"Wha-..." Apparently the enormity of that declaration - coming as it was after their previous day in
the slaughterhouse - was leaving even Maxwell speechless.

"There was a mess on L2," Wufei explained. "I'm in Freeport to get away from the consequences of
a decision I made."

you kill somebody? Jesus Christ, are you telling me you're on the lam?!"

"I didn't kill anybody." Wufei felt his mouth twist into something too bitter to even look like a smile.
"Oh, sorry, that is incorrect. I killed a great number of people, but that was in the line of duty. If I'd
stayed out of trouble and ended up killing ten times more, I'd have gotten a medal."

"What? What the fuck did you do, Chang?!!"

"A lot of things, but arresting the Governor of L2 is what got me sent here."

Duo's foot slipped from the barrel and the whole thing rocked as he landed on it heavily. Wufei
 glanced up, concerned, to see Duo sitting there, staring at Wufei with eyes and mouth wide open.
Wufei wished he could enjoy the fact he'd taken the cocky smuggler completely off guard for the
first time in their acquaintance.

"You what?!" Duo finally gasped.

"You heard me."

"Dude, are you allowed to do that?!!"

"Of course not," Wufei growled. "What do you think I'm doing here?"

"Sweet Mother Mary- you mean, you really are on the lam?!!"

"I just have to lie low for awhile. Barton and Une can clear it up, if I'm not around to-

"Une too?!" Duo took a deep breath and released it noisily. "Chang, before you give me heart
failure, why don't you start from the beginning. Make sense, willya?"

Wufei almost wished he had been chasing Carver over some vendetta. Duo didn't sound too angry,
but he hadn't yet realized that Wufei had been risking Duo's life and situation in Freeport for a
charade. Once he grasped that, he'd be very angry indeed, and Wufei couldn't blame him.

"Well?" Duo asked, steely impatience in his voice.
Wufei looked down at his hands. Strong, capable. The hands of a martial artist and a killer.

"It's something I had to do. Obviously. It's the result of a sort of arrangement between Barton, Yuy and myself. It's complicated." Wufei's voice was abrupt to hide the fact he didn't really know what he was going to say. He'd had a terse explanation ready from the start, in case Duo discovered the truth, but that was before they'd gotten to know each other, before they'd been blooded together in combat and gone home and had sex and slept side by side...His prepared words now seemed short to the point of insulting. Duo deserved more.

...But the sequence of events that had ended up with him cuffing the Governor of L2 to a rusty pipe was not something Wufei or his two colleagues ever talked about. It had evolved organically, with barely any discussion; it was so fundamental to who they were, how they fought for peace, that it had never needed words till now.

"The first year after the war, we were busy fighting armed insurgency. That's what Heero still does. He's deadly if his opponent has a weapon. Things like right and wrong, and justice...they don't mean much to him." That sounded like a condemnation, but it was the truth, and was strangely part of the reason why Wufei admired his friend. "He...just does what needs to be done. And nobody argues. He's the destroyer of Libra. The savior of the Earth. At this point he can do no wrong, and Trowa makes sure to keep that image intact, which means that I have to--"

His sword scratched in the dirt at his feet. His choice of words was completely wrong; it made it all sound cold and calculating, and it hadn't happened like that. Wufei had been the one to let his thirst for immediate justice override caution four years ago and send the Police Commissioner of London Borough to the hospital. And they'd never been able to prove the bastard had accepted those bribes anyway, not before a court. Trowa had done damage control and used the situation to quietly force the man out of office, and...things had just...evolved...

An impatient huff from Duo reminded Wufei that he had a limited time to explain himself before the smuggler took the logical course of beating the truth out of him. The problem was, the truth was such a strange, hybrid thing these days.

"Trowa's at the forefront. That man is an amazing infiltrator. I know who he is, what he does, but I swear sometimes even I can't tell where the real Trowa Barton ends and Une's sycophantic little aide begins." Trowa himself blurred the line on a regular basis. Wufei was long past being vexed at the way his friend - and Trowa was his friend - manipulated him. It was just part of who Trowa was. Might as well resent Heero's single-mindedness or Une's checkered past.

"What are you saying?" Duo sounded angry and confused, not a good combination for someone volatile and armed to the teeth. "Trowa is Une's aide. Right?"

"Oh yes. Une relies on him completely. Second Lieutenant Barton is efficient, approachable, obviously a bit too young for his important role. Easily influenced, undoubtedly bribable. Sally calls him the Honey Trap. From the start, Trowa has been approached by dozens of officers and politicians who tried to use him to influence Une or buy the Preventers." The worst offenders had been discreetly purged from the government. They'd rarely been brought to justice though, because the scandal of some of the affairs Trowa had uncovered could rip apart the civil service the Peacecraft administration was resting on.

"Yeah, well, same shit as always," Duo grunted.

"It's not supposed to be the same shit!" Wufei barked, hands clenching around the hilt of his sword. There was a chunk of graffiti that was appearing all over the colonies and in Earth slums this past year. He'd spotted it in Freeport as well. 'The rich get their way, the poor pay'. Some people were
starting to see past the beauty of Relena's vision and realize that things weren't changing fast enough. Wufei blamed most of the riots on this one fact.

"The cozening Romefeller gentry has been established for decades on Earth; all those counts and viceroy's and whatever. Their corruption has filtered down to all levels of our institutions. It's poisoning the peace. When somebody rich or famous commits a crime, all the friends from his 'good ole boy's club' rally around him. When it isn't graft, fraud or bribery, it's simply incompetence protected and covered up by old friends.

"This isn't terrorism; this isn't murder and war. But it's insidious, and, since most of these rich men built their family fortunes on weapons manufacture, it's a war waiting to happen, even if the downtrodden in our society put up with it, which I'm not counting on for a minute."

Duo said nothing. The L2 street-rat had grown up as a victim of that very system. He would know it better than Wufei.

"Trowa has done a lot of damage to this setup; so has Relena, by coming down hard on those spots of corruption that could be disclosed. But Trowa, and the infiltrator team he trained, have to stay friends with the trash; they can't act openly in a lot of cases. Besides, this way of doing things is so ingrained in our society, there is very little we can do legally that won't put our whole political system in jeopardy. That's when Trowa needs me.

"I cut right through those genteel arrangements they all have. I perform unsustainable arrests, I violate their rights, I search their houses, I drag them away in cuffs. I harass their families and frighten away their rich friends. If I can carry a conviction, all the better. Most of the time the judge throws it out, but by then I've gotten them to talk, and their friends know it. And the rest of those rich parasites fear me all the more." Wufei had made some of the most powerful men on Earth flinch just by staring at them thoughtfully for a few seconds. The look in their eyes when he had them in his grip for the legal twenty-four hours and they realized their petty little threats and bribes weren't going to get them out...It was one of the few highlights of the job.

Something squirmed through the nearby wreckage, probably a rat. Wufei automatically tracked the movement, then shook his head. "Of course, what I do is not right. Maybe it's a form of justice, but it's without restraint, proof or legality. It's intimidation in its basest form, and what's worse, I get away with it because I'm a Preventer and under Une's protection. And sometimes, the men are innocent...I've had to...do other things as well. Frighten away journalists who were getting too near truths that could ruin us all. Harass honest men because their efforts at setting up unions or relief efforts were being subverted by criminals and the corrupt. Then I had to ignore those same criminals because they were still untouchable...In the end, I'm no better than those Alliance officers who used their mandate to abuse the system all over L2 and the other colonies."

He waited for Duo to respond to that blunt statement, but there was only silence. Wufei wanted to look at his ally, to see how this was going down, but his body felt frozen in that straight-backed rigid posture, sword held straight up before him.

"That's why Une must punish me when one of my misdemeanors come to light. Otherwise, there really wouldn't be any difference between the Preventers and any other enforcement arm of dictatorship. She keeps me on the force by cleverly lining up my brilliant arrest record against the demotions and demerits I've earned. I think Trowa's taught her to juggle knives in her spare time...Above all else, my fellow Preventers, the many who aren't corrupt, are not supposed to admire me for this aspect of my work. I am a violent creature and we're supposed to turn away from violence. I do what must be done to avoid disaster, but the righteous must hate me so much for it that they will eventually come up with a better way. The new world must never depend on terrorists like
us again for its salvation. I guess you can say I've made myself the enemy in order to teach them what they have to fear to become. I find it both easy to do and rather gratifying. Sometimes I wonder if Treize and I are not more similar than I like to think..."

The long-drawn out howl of a metal crate being lifted by a rusty crane echoed in the distance. Wufei watched a light on the far-off sector wall blinking on...off...on...

He fished around for the rest of the story. He hadn't really needed to tell Duo any of this, he could have just given him a quick summary of what had happened on L2-X953. But he'd wanted his friend to understand that Wufei wasn't really the loose cannon his enemies and colleagues thought he was. He could wait a long time for justice and revenge; he did so often enough. His list of names and faces was getting so long...

"You know what happened on L2-X953. The rioters were getting organized. Heero was down with concussion. A state of emergency had been declared; that gives the Special Division automatic jurisdiction over all other forces. Heero had put me in charge before they evacuated him." An unpopular decision to say the least, but not even the other Specials had been able to protest Captain Yuy's direct order which put Wufei in charge until someone who outranked Heero - Trowa, in that instance - arrived to relieve Wufei of command. Besides, for all his colleagues disliked him, they had to admit that when it came to strong-arm tactics, Wufei had nothing to learn from anyone.

"We'd located the leaders a few hours before Yuy was injured; they'd holed up in view of a final assault. I was planning on taking them out, one hard, bloody strike. The mobs could be brought under control without them. And that's when the L2 Governor landed unexpectedly on the colony and declared that he was going to make a direct appeal to the populace. He was going to go among the crowds, reason with them, shake hands, kiss babies, show them that he didn't really think they were violent rioters, just basically misunderstood. Along those lines. He was organizing the news crews on arrival, before he even notified us. He must have thought it would make a brilliant TV shot, something to put in his ads next time he's on the campaign trail. He's not a corrupt man; he's one of Relena's appointees. He's idealistic, without necessarily the vision or wisdom to go with it. Seriously believing he could put an end to such a volatile and complex situation with a rousing speech...That only works in the bloody movies. In real life, one bullet is all that's needed to herald a general insurrection. That kind of incident has started wars. Bloody fool. You don't wave the torch of Peace around when you're sitting on a powder keg."

Wufei glared down at his lacquered scabbard, the dark lines as straight and rigid as ideals were supposed to be. He knew he sounded bitter and cynical. And he was. But there had been a tiny part of him which had wanted to let the man try, see if finally mankind had evolved enough to... but hope was not enough. The politician had fallen for his own government's propaganda. Wufei had spent years fighting a war and then riots and unrest; he knew just how volatile the situation was. Their peace wasn't that strong yet.

"In the shuffle of arriving troops I managed to reassign the Governor's escort and isolate him in the Mayor's evacuated mansion. I explained the situation to him very carefully. I told him he was endangering the whole colony with his stupid stunt, maybe the whole of L2. When he refused to back down, I arrested him on the grounds that he was promoting civil unrest, and cuffed him and his secretary down in the basement."

"Fuck," Duo croaked.

"Hm. Then I told everyone he'd changed his mind."

The relief of the troops and the other Specials had been palpable. Some of his colleagues had looked at Wufei in a way that indicated they had a good idea why the Governor had 'changed his mind', but
they said nothing. This was the sort of thing Chang Wufei got up to, after all. They pragmatically accepted the risk he'd taken for the opportunity it was and put it to good use.

"We went ahead with the assault. It was brutal. They were well armed, and someone had been training them."

Wufei had insisted that he be dropped directly into the compound, to cause chaos and distraction and allow a frontal assault by the police. He'd landed in their midst like some divine punishment. It had been gruesome and liberating; it had been necessary. The death toll would have been ten times higher if he'd played it safe, let the Governor get himself killed and then dealt with the ensuing chaos.

But in the eyes of those who wanted to believe in peace, Wufei had fallen back on violence instead of giving humanity's new vision a chance. The worst was, though Wufei was almost entirely convinced that the Governor's intervention would have led to disaster, even he couldn't be one hundred percent sure of it. Had he stopped humanity from proving they were, once and for all, moving away from the path of destruction?

"Trowa arrived as we were cleaning up," he muttered, speaking absently as he wrestled with the doubts he'd managed to bury under his mission for the last two months. "I'd left him a message, so he knew to go and free the Governor. Trowa clapped the man into hospital for a few hours on account of dehydration or something, and got me off the colony on the first transport of wounded out of there. Une wanted me back on Earth; I was too vulnerable in space. She planned to put me in the stockade again. I'd be safe enough and under inquiry until she could apply pressure and let the whole thing blow over while keeping up appearances."

"Stockade."

The word was uttered in an oddly flat tone. Wufei shrugged without looking up.

"It's happened a couple of times. Depends on what I've had to do. I don't have to go that far all that often. Most of my career is flawless," Wufei said with no attempt at false modesty. If it hadn't been, he'd have been more a liability than a help and Une would have gotten rid of him long ago.

"When she can, Une lets me off lightly; I get a reprimand, a short suspension, or counseling," Wufei's voice darkened with distaste at the latter. "Once she put me on traffic duty. That was a rather restful month actually, and I was able to arrest two drug dealers outside a night club. But if the case is high profile, she has to go further."

He'd been a guest of the High Security wing of Preventer's Internal Affairs jail for three weeks on one occasion and for a couple of months on another. Wufei had rather enjoyed the calm, the solitude and the chance to meditate and reflect on his choices. When he grew bored, the director, a friend of Une's, smuggled in a few of his books.

"Some of my colleagues don't understand why I'm still in the force when I'm a violent hard-ass who occasionally flies off the handle and throws procedure out the window. A few of them...might have an idea, but...well, overall, the word is that Une prefers to keep an eye on me rather than have me run wild. Then there was the rumor I was sleeping with Trowa to keep my job, but I had Heero put a stop to that right away. Trowa is a remarkably good officer for someone his age, and in a difficult position. He doesn't deserve that kind of slander."

Duo made an odd sound in his throat. Probably irritated with all this meandering. Wufei hadn't realized he could talk this much, especially on this subject which always filled him with ambivalence. On the one hand his methods allowed him to still pursue Justice, often a purer form than the mongrel lawyer-ridden laws allowed; it was practically his raison d'etre. It made the compromises he still had
to choke down a little more palatable. But then at the end of the day he'd look around and realize his choices had put him at odds with good, honorable people, like the one he faced now. He had to let these men he respected think he was some kind of loose cannon with no respect for the law, even though Wufei considered self-discipline and control to be fundamental tenets of the warrior code, and he knew the law in and out. Wufei, who abhorred lies and dissimulation so strongly he'd never been able to bury himself in a cover story back during the Gundam wars, was now living a lie coming and going and sometimes he felt like he was losing himself in it...

None of his friends, not Heero or Sally or anyone, knew how much this troubled him. It wasn't their concern; they all had their roles to play in this half-baked stage that was the necessary painful mutation from one state of society to another. Besides, deep down, Wufei knew he probably deserved this. Some of his past choices had been pretty bad for nowhere near as valid a reason. He was so very good at the role, too...and there were too many times where he liked it...It was easier being the one to fear and abhor than being the one to emulate and follow.

Damn it, he'd fallen silent again. Duo was probably getting impatient waiting for the bit that actually concerned him; what did he care about the last five years of Wufei's life...

"Trowa countermanded Une's order. He said he didn't want me rotting in the legal system when I could be doing something useful. He fished around until he found a somewhat low-risk mission in Freeport and packed me off. If I was on a Specials undercover op, I couldn't be dragged back to face an enquiry and that'd give Une time to do some damage control. Barton was also thinking of future missions. Since Heero's promotion last year, he's involved with Relena's security on a frequent basis. Because of a, ah, an incident with her awhile back, I'm not even allowed in the palace anymore. Barton was going to see if you could ease me into Freeport's society like you did with Heero. If you could, and we worked well together, then I could take over Heero's undercover missions here in the future. I certainly blew that...If it makes you feel any better, I imagine Trowa will be even more furious with me than you are."

The barrel shook slightly. Boots crunched through garbage. Wufei's view of the wasteland was eclipsed by a long leather coat as Duo stopped in front of him.

"So your job here was to lie low, look for Carver only if it was not too dangerous for us, and get used to Freeport?" Duo's voice was as light and threatening as a garrote.

"Yes."

"So why've we been risking our necks, looking for this-"

"Because Carver is a killer!"

His snarl sliced through the quiet air and sparked echoes off a nearby shed. Wufei glared down at his hands, twisting his sword's hilt as if they were trying to strangle it. Trowa would be asking him the same question. Trowa could be very subtle and cold-blooded for the cause; oh so patient and calculating. He would want to know what the hell Wufei had been thinking, and he'd give Wufei this pitiful, understanding look when Wufei explained but- dammit!

"He's a rabid dog who needs to be put down. The mission was just an excuse, but I took it. Carver is - should have been only Class B, and with our shortage of manpower we can't afford the sort of manhunt it would take to track him down. I saw his file. The only plan for his arrest was to wait until he happens to get caught red-handed on the crime-scene of one of his paid hits so that we can get an easy conviction. But that's not right! Class A or B- what difference does it make to his victims, that he kills for politics or for money?! I can't ignore a crime just because it's expedient to do so. And since I was actually going to have this criminal in my grasp for once, I was damned if I was going to
wait once more for justice that'll almost certainly never come about any other way!

"But that's my problem, and I know very well it doesn't concern you. That's why I lied. I didn't think you'd help me if you knew that you were just supposed to keep me out of trouble," Wufei finished abruptly. He didn't lift his eyes higher than Duo's leather-clad knees. His head was hurting, it felt like the entire colony was leaning on his neck, and he didn't want to see Duo staring at him with anger and disappointment...He also didn't want Duo to see his face, because even now he knew he couldn't look repentant if he tried.

"You'd have been right," Duo said shortly. "I don't risk my life for Peace, Justice or anything with a fucking capital."

The tone wasn't the accusing one Wufei had expected. Surprise made him glance up despite his resolve not to. Duo wasn't even looking at him. He was staring off into the distance, and that chilling, bitter gleam was back in his eyes, that darkness turned inwards that had haunted his words a few hours before...Wufei would have preferred any amount of furious accusations aimed at his own head, because he didn't know what that look meant, but he instinctively hated it.

"I should kick your ass," Duo growled, snapping out of whatever mindset had captured him and turning on Wufei with the glare one would expect.

"I know," Wufei acknowledged, getting ready for the first blow, verbal or otherwise.

"You should have told me. Fuck! I'd have said no, but you should have told me anyway!"

Yes, he should have. But he hadn't. He'd put his mission, the one that existed only in his head, above his and Duo's safety, and given the chance he'd do it again. That made apologies meaningless, so Wufei remained silent.

"And what's worse, you let them-" Duo words ended in a primal growl.

Wufei started back, but seated as he was, he couldn't dodge Duo's grab. The fierce grip on his collar forced him to look up into Duo's eyes. Wufei forbade himself to move or struggle, waiting for the deluge of blame-

"We don't have the time." Duo spoke slowly and distinctly. "We don't have the time for this shit. I'm gonna put this aside for now. For now. 'Cause otherwise- but let's move on. And the rest? I'll just say one thing. Those Outsiders better like their peace when they finally build it. Cause it'll be your blood in the cement. You and Heero- you're the only real friends I got, and you go around like you're dead men walking. Like you don't have any rights- like you don't even count! Get. A. Life!"

"Justice is my life," Wufei answered, tearing away from the hold. He didn't know where this was going or what Duo was getting at, but Wufei knew that much.

"Yeah, I know. I just wish I could see you laugh more often," Duo muttered. The gloved hand fell down to Duo's side in a loose gesture like an admission of defeat.

Before Wufei could say anything - not that he had any idea of what to say - Duo erupted into motion again, grabbing Wufei's wrist and yanking him to his feet. Wufei staggered away from the barrel and stumbled after Duo who was literally dragging him towards Recyc.

"Come on. I'll rip strips outta ya another day. Let's go finish your mission."

Wufei nearly bit his tongue as he tripped over a piece of piping with his mouth open.
"But- but Duo, Carver isn't really- I mean, that wasn't really what Trowa sent me here for-"

"Yeah, well, even clown-boy don't know everything then," said Duo without turning around. "I know better than to try to pry you or Heero away from your mission, and I don't mean the kind that comes in a manila folder with 'Directives' on it. I'll help you kick ass and take names, and keep the Band-aids handy for afterwards. Come on."

Wufei lurched after Duo, the hand still gripping his wrist as if the smuggler wasn't planning on ever letting him go.
"A legacy so far removed,
One day will be improved.
Eternal rights we left behind,
We were the better kind.
Two the same, set free too,
I always looked to you...

We fought for good, stood side by side,
Our friendship never died.
On stranger waves, the lows and highs,
Our vision touched the sky,
Immortalists with points to prove,
I put my trust in you...

A house somewhere on foreign soil,
Where ageless lovers call,
Is this your goal, your final needs,
Where dogs and vultures eat,
Committed still I turn to go.
I put my trust in you.
I put my trust in you..."
---Joy Division, 'Means to an End'

Six Outer Trolls were waiting for them at the main entrance into Recyc, eyes grim over the rim of their scarves. Duo had let go of Wufei's wrist by that point. They approached the Trolls boldly, side by side, as if they hadn't crept in by a back entrance only the day before.

The Trolls turned without a word and walked off. Their stance made it clear that it would be very unwise for the two 'guests' not to follow. Wufei and Duo trailed after their guides, keeping out of strike range. Wufei could feel three more people falling in step somewhere behind them. At least he and Duo hadn't been disarmed. He hoped that was a good sign.

The last time they'd been through here, they'd been running and fighting. The corridors full of pipes, humidity, shadows and clanking machinery were even more ominous now that they were walking through them at a slow pace. The occasional crude pictogram looked like the curses on the walls of ancient tombs. The mournful shuffle of the Troll's rubber boots was the only sound their guides were making.

Duo walked with his hands in his pockets and a smile on his face. Wufei could read the tension in his friend's stance, but he envied Duo's outward composure. He kept himself under tight control, showing nothing. His mind was spinning quickly. He had no hopes now of getting information about Carver or anything else out of these people, he concentrated on committing the exit route to memory and on ways of keeping Duo safe.

The Outer Trolls ahead stopped abruptly and without explanation. There were more symbols on the walls, painted in vivid red splashes. The Outer Trolls appeared unwilling to walk past them and go
any further.

Wufei and Duo stopped cautiously, but their guides didn't even glance back at them. Wufei half-turned so that he covered their backs while Duo took a step forwards. The smuggler opened his mouth, about to ask a question, when a shuffling noise caught their attention. Four Inner Trolls appeared at the end of the corridor beyond the symbols, coming towards the group.

The Outer Trolls waited until the four had joined them, then saluted and left, still without a word. Wufei remembered the ceremony in which the Outer Trolls had passed two bodies to the inner working of Recyc a dozen hours ago. The memory was not a reassuring one.

The goggles and masks the Inner Trolls all wore made it impossible to judge their expression, but their stance was hostile even under the plastic poncho and apron. The four turned and marched off without bothering with an order or a threat. Wufei and Duo followed. They were still being tailed in the distance, by at least five people now, Wufei judged.

Duo snorted under his breath and opened his mouth, but Wufei quickly brushed the back of Duo's hand with his fingers, stopping the undoubtedly loud, sarcastic comment that had been about to come out in reaction to the oppressive silence. Duo gave him an irritated look; Shinigami did not like others to think he'd been cowed by their little display of force. Neither did Wufei, but at this point diplomacy was going to be key. Duo got the message as he simply sighed and stuck his hands in his pockets again without saying anything.

They crossed rooms of steaming vats, the air thick with sickly humid heat and the smell of fermenting waste and ammonia. There were dozens of Trolls working on machinery, operating cranes to move barrels around, or watching consoles with clipboards at hand. All activity ceased when Duo and Wufei were spotted. The two intruders were stared at until they'd followed their silent guides to the next room. Wufei felt his sword growing heavy over his shoulder. Duo's grin was sharp and dangerous.

The Inner Trolls split into two groups of two and stopped at either sides of a large roll-up door. Wufei felt Duo move abruptly; when he glanced at his friend, Duo's hand had left his pockets and his eyes had narrowed.

The reason for Duo's sudden increase of tension was obvious when the door creaked, groaned and slowly rolled upwards, and a puff of freezing air hit their faces with the smell of harsh air-conditioning, antiseptic and something a good deal less pleasant. The Rendering Room. Wufei wondered if he and Duo had just obligingly walked all the way to their final destination, the ultimate destination of all space-born humans.

The silent Trolls stood on either side of the entrance, an unspoken order to enter. Duo moved forward boldly and Wufei followed, falling three steps behind Duo in case they had to fight.

The cold air bit their faces harshly, a contrast to the sick warmth of the rest of Recyc. The door behind them creaked and descended again.

There were an impressive number of corpses on display, naked and laid out on slabs. Wufei didn't do more than glance at the silent ranks before focusing on the three living figures at the end of the room. He felt a slight flutter of relief, and at his side Duo stuck his hands in his pockets again and released a small breath of air in a near-silent sigh. If the Trolls had wanted to kill them and render their bodies, they'd have had a good deal more people at hand.

As they walked towards the small huddle of Trolls, Wufei took a second, longer look around the room. There were gurneys with plastic sheets next to a few slabs, ready to take the dead on their final
trip through a pair of sliding doors a little further on. A thick window revealed the room beyond the
doors, the actual Rendering Room itself. A dozen empty gurneys loitered around a big machine that
disappeared into the far wall. It was perpetually drawing a conveyor belt into the maw of its inner
workings. Two Inner Trolls stood nearby. Wufei didn't know if they'd just fed it a corpse, or if they
were waiting for the bodies in this room to be brought out.

A lot of the bodies Wufei and Duo were passing had died a violent death, he couldn't help but note.
At the foot of each slab, a plastic crate held rumpled clothes; some red scarves peeked out of a few of
them. There were about twenty dead, more than he and Duo could be responsible for. Besides,
Wufei knew that some of his victims from a few hours ago had only been wounded; severely,
enough to disable them and stop them from following the fugitives, but not fatally...unless they'd
received no medical help at all, that is.

His gaze was not friendly as it settled on the figure they were approaching. Wufei killed without
regret or compunction, but only when he needed to. Finishing off the wounded was the act of vermin
and cowards.

The Troll waiting for them was dressed in a red plastic poncho and a red hard-hat. The King of this
twisted domain, presumably.

"Maxwell," the Troll growled.

"Hey, your majesty, how's it going?" Duo drew a lazy Freeport salute in the air. It'd take more than a
few dead bodies to oppress Duo. The more you tried to keep him down, Wufei thought with
something like exasperated admiration, the harder he popped right back up in your face.

There was a glower aimed at the cocky smuggler from behind the thick goggles, then the King made
a gesture beneath his poncho. "I should have you spaced, you bloody dog. The fact I'm letting you
live covers our debt. Is that clear?"

"Crystal," Duo assented, smiling cheekily.

Debt? Wufei remembered Duo mentioning that someone in Recyc owed him. Duo hadn't bothered
telling him it was the King of Trolls himself. Wufei contemplated strangling this closed-mouth - yet
oh so loud - annoyance after they'd left Recyc, but the truth was he owed Duo more than a few
secrets himself.

"Right," the King grunted, voice gloomy through the mask. "Now, I brought you here for a reason."

"I gathered that-" Duo started to say, but abruptly lost his lighthearted demeanor as the King stood
aside.

Wufei moved to stand next to Duo and glanced down at the corpse the King had revealed. This one
was covered in a sheet, affording it a bit more dignity than the others. The sheet stopped at the
shoulders, leaving the face visible. It was Herb Spasson.

Duo whispered something, almost inaudible; Wufei only heard it because he was right next to Duo,
his hand anchored on Duo's shoulder as they looked down at the body together. "Sorry, signora..."

Wufei, more practical, reached out for the sheet and then glanced up at the Trolls. Nobody forbade it,
but one of the others present turned away abruptly and started rearranging some scissors and forceps
on a side table with a bit more clatter than necessary.

A tug of the sheet and the cause of death was revealed. A massive cut across the chest, starting near
the right shoulder and digging down deep into the body nearly to the bowels. The corpse had been
washed; the white skin was free of any traces of blood except a few clots still clinging to the gaping lips of the wound, flesh and muscle and bone visible beneath. Death must have been almost instantaneous. Wufei glanced at Duo, who nodded shortly. Wufei leaned forward and examined the wound closely, not that he needed a forensic expert to tell him what had happened. It was pretty clear. But why?

"Duo, I know you don't lie, so give me a yes-or-no answer." The King spoke heavily, apparently not intrigued by Wufei's actions. "Did you want to kill this man?"

"No," Duo answered immediately. "I needed to ask him some questions, but I'd have gotten him out of Freeport alive."

"I see."

A pair of hands in thick rubber gloves reached for the sheet and pulled it up slowly. Wufei straightened. Without looking at the corpse in its initial state and in the undisturbed crime scene, he couldn't swear the culprit was Carver, but his gut was telling him so.

"What happened?" Duo asked, after the King had adjusted the sheet, this time covering Herb's face.

"Lesley?" the King asked, stepping back.

The Troll who'd spun away when Wufei removed the sheet finally turned back towards them. He-she, Wufei realized after a second glance - was wearing an apron and poncho, but no hard hat, goggles or mask; those Trollish implements were on the small table nearby. She appeared calm, her eyes clear and hard, but Wufei spotted movement beneath her poncho, as if she was gripping her hands hard and rubbing them together again and again.

"Herb's my brother," she announced. Then her composure wavered; she bit her lip hard as if trying to catch the present tense of her statement before anyone could hear it.

She looked like Herb, Wufei decided after examining her clinically. Same body shape beneath the formless poncho, same round, meaty face, even the same shaved skull. Probably a few years younger.

"Ah," Duo said softly. That did explain a lot. Herb had been hiding with family. "What happened, Lesley?"

"Perry can tell you," she answered, motioning blindly towards the third Troll present. Her words were short, clipped and controlled. She stared at Duo, at Wufei, at the edge of the gurney or at the window to the next room, anywhere but at the corpse before her.

The third Troll was taller than either Lesley or the King. He looked thinner under his poncho, but his shoulders were broad; you probably got a lot of exercise hauling bodies around as a Troll.

"I'd taken a unit of Outers around Fermentation-D1 to try to circle them," Perry stated, voice muffled by his mask. 'Them' was the bodies he'd indicated with a wave directed behind Duo and Wufei. "But these three popped up right in front of us, they were ahead of the others. One of them..."

He hesitated and glanced at Lesley who straightened and glared back at him, daring him to soften the words for her sake.

"One of them was a really tall guy. He moved before I'd even realized we'd run into some invaders. It was too fast, I couldn't do anything."
"No, you couldn't," Duo agreed. "He's a professional killer."

Perry nodded quickly. "Before I even realized we'd found the enemy, he... " one more glance at Lesley, "He spun around, so bloody fast, and killed Spasson. Herb, I mean. Didn't even hesitate; like, just one stride and wham."

Lesley nodded sharply, encouraging Perry to continue. Only her eyes had flinched at the words. She started chewing her lip savagely and glaring at nothing when Perry continued.

"Then he killed Amos," the Troll continued, bitter and angry. "The kid was just standing there, but he was in the way. Wack, blow from the sword-thing he carried, right in the head."

Wufei followed another vague hand gesture and realized there was a second sheeted corpse on a gurney across the room from Herb. The clothes in the bin were neatly folded and the hard hat of an Outer Troll had been placed on top of the pile.

"Then he grabbed his friend and ran," the Troll concluded. He was staring at Amos' body and Wufei caught a furious glint behind the goggles.

"Grabbed him?"

"Yeah. The third guy with them was small and weedy, I barely noticed him what with everything going on. He was yelling something. Dunno what, but he looked really angry. He was on his knees next to Spasson and was trying to stop the bleeding, but then the big guy grabbed him and dragged him off."

When Wufei and Duo had caught up with Carver and Ferret, the latter had been giving the assassin a furious glare that was rather at odds with the rat's lack of backbone. It seemed strange that an amoral, cowardly creature like Ferret, who killed when it was easy and ran away from anything like a fair fight, could get that righteously upset over the death of a friend. Then again, he probably didn't have all that many. Even a creature like that could be capable of loyalty. Wufei had learned back during the war that nobody was entirely black or white.

"We let them both go without trying to stop them," Perry concluded with another swift glance at Lesley. "There were only three of us left."

"That was wise," Duo said straightforwardly. "He would have killed all of you as easily as Herb and Amos if you didn't have projectile weapons."

"We don't have projectile weapons here," the King ground out. "You don't cart crossbows around a place with high-pressure vats of boiling liquids and pipes full of chlorine. Do you know who those guys were? Yes-or-no answer." The King obviously knew Duo well.

"No, I don't. I don't know their names, and I don't know where to find them, though I'd certainly like to," Duo answered, eyes on Herb's body once more.

"So what were you."

"I want you to find them."

Everybody looked at Lesley who had interrupted the King.

"I want you to find them," she repeated, still quietly, but there was a waver of strain in her voice, a pained helpless anger with no outlet. "I know Herb was nothing to you, but you're looking for those men for your own account, right?"
"Sort of," Duo hedged.

Lesley blinked and her eyes grew hard and wounded, her control finally slipping. "They can't just walk away from what they've done. They can't just do this and get away with it. It's not right. If I knew who they were- why this happened- you have to find them! This is your fault!"

Duo didn't contradict her sudden outburst, but Lesley's voice rose again as if he'd denied it.

"It's your fault! If you hadn't bumped into Herb last month, he wouldn't have been on the run! Nobody would have bothered him! He'd still be alive!"

"Lesley," the King said, his muffled voice gentle but firm. "Maxwell's a pain in the ass, but he didn't mean Herb any harm. Herb died because he went with that big bruiser earlier."

Lesley bit her lip. The air hitched in her throat and she blinked rapidly. "It's not fair," she whispered, her voice shaking, and looked away.

Wufei tended to agree with her. He knew how it felt to lose someone close and not have any justice for it. To see that person crushed by forces beyond ones comprehension, a casualty barely noticed...

"No, it's not fair." Duo's voice was gentle. "And I'll do my best to find them. I guess that's why I'm here? I mean, the real reason?"

The King huffed, but then nodded.

"We don't mix with people outside the Temple," he growled. "If we wanted to, we could force the Elders to start a massive levee to nail the bastards that invaded Recyc, but nobody knows who they are, so that wouldn't get far. I got a feeling that smarts and discretion are better at this stage than a man-hunt. Lesley, tell Duo what you told me."

Lesley rubbed her nose on her sleeve and looked at Duo. She'd gathered her composure again; only her anger was still visible.

"Herb told me about you," she said. "But you were just an annoyance. He said you weren't the problem. Otherwise, I'd kill you."

Duo nodded solemnly as if this was a perfectly natural statement. But his eyes had narrowed slightly. "Not the problem?" he prompted, when Lesley fell silent.

"Me and Herb... We didn't stay that close after we lost our homes on our previous colony, ten years ago. I came here and I entered Recyc. He went to fight. But he came here after the war. We talked a bit when I could get permission..." Duo had told Wufei that Inner Trolls and people from the 'Outer World', that is, the rest of Freeport, didn't mingle much if at all. The Trolls were their own little colony, and the few recruits who made it into their ranks were entering a monastery of life, death and rebirth.

"He contacted me over a week ago 'cause he said he'd run into trouble and had to disappear awhile. He said a rat-catcher had tried to bug a friend of his, and that he might be next. His friend - Al, that little piece of shit!"

Lesley stopped and breathed deeply through her nose. Wufei wondered why she kept herself on such a tight leash. Pride? Reluctance to break down in front of strangers? Or were Trolls not supposed to feel anything for the dead, even family?

"Al hid him, so that Herb couldn't spill anything to you. Al told Herb your name. Rat-catcher
Maxwell, he called you. Then he helped Herb to hide from you, because they'd been in the same resistance cell during the war."

"Do you know Al's last name?"

"No, and I wish I did!" Lesley spat. "Herb said Al didn't want anybody to know. Said there was something big involved. He trusted that asshole! Herb always was too loyal to people...But he was scared about the others in Al's group. Especially when somebody started asking around about Herb and Al. Somebody other than you, that is."

Duo's eyebrows shot up. "Somebody other than- you sure about that?"

"Yeah," Lesley muttered, rubbing her nose again. "Herb wasn't worried about you, neither was Al. They said you were a shit-stirrer, but you didn't stand a chance of finding anything."

Duo wrinkled his nose and smiled self-deprecatingly. Wufei couldn't stop from bristling a bit though; if Herb hadn't disappeared from Bakunin, Duo would have found him.

"So who was Herb worried about?"

"Herb didn't know who they were, but he knew there was some other guys after him for the same reason as you were; because he knew Al. He overheard Al tell somebody. Something about a murder, too. Herb decided that made a lot of people looking for him, and all because he knew who Al and some of Al's friends were. That's when he started to get scared."

"Because Al might not want to hurt him, but Al's friends were another matter."

"Yeah. He got a letter to me through an Outer Troll, and I-" Lesley interrupted herself and her gaze finally dropped to Herb's body.

"Herb came here," the King said brusquely. "He hid out from everybody - from you, from this Al and his buddies, and from those other guys who were looking for him, some rival gang I suppose. He could have stayed hidden here for months. But he got stupid, and decided to get out of the colony. And that's how you and the others found him, I bet."

"Yeah."

"Lesley? Why don't you take Herb to the other room. Spend some time with him. Then- do you want to assist with his Rebirth? Perry can take care of it if you'd rather-"

"Death is Life. Death is nothing but the door to Rebirth," Lesley recited. It sounded completely automatic, and the deep hurt in her eyes didn't fade even when she drew herself up and lifted her head, determined. "I'm fine, sir. I'll take care of him."

Herb was already on a gurney. Lesley kicked the brakes off and pushed him towards the double doors, her face set in a mask of calm and her hands on the gurney's rail tight enough to turn white and hard as bone. The King gave Perry a pointed gaze, and the Troll followed her quickly after gathering her hat, gloves and mask from the table. Wufei could hear him whisper to her consolingly as they entered the next room.

"She blames herself," the King said, causing Duo and Wufei to turn away from the doors that had closed behind the two Trolls. "She encouraged Herb to break away from this Al character and hide out here."

"It was a good hiding place," Duo sighed.
"Yeah, it was Herb who blew it. If he'd stayed here and kept his head down...but when his 'friends' showed up, he must have been scared not to follow them. Who knows what promises of safety those bastards gave him."

"Carver must have been ordered to see Herb and Al out," Duo added, thoughtfully tapping his chin with one of his artificial digits. "And if there were any signs that Herb might get away again, or if their exit was blocked, the boss ordered Carver to silence Herb once and for all."

"Carver?" the King asked sharply.

"A nickname."

"Bad taste, Maxwell, and this is me talking."

Duo shrugged. "I didn't choose it. And before you ask, we don't know who the boss is either, but we'd like to find out."

"I want you to find out. You and your...whatever he is."

"He's my Blade," Duo said sharply.

"Yeah, and I'm President Peacecraft. Elder Braun contacted me personally nearly two months ago with an exact description of this guy and told me that if somebody like him showed up in Recyc, I was to get back to him ASAP. He doesn't do that for any other Blade, and I've seen quite a few pass through our gates."

Wufei glanced at Duo, who was frowning.

"King," Duo said warningly, "this is-"

"None of my business. I don't care what happens out there, I just take care of your bodies. Braun and the other Elders know what they're doing, it's to be hoped. I don't care, and I don't want to know. What I do want to know is who thought they could waltz through my Temple and get away with it. And Lesley wants to know why her brother died. And though I know you're not directly at fault, Maxwell, you are involved. You know it's safer to comply with the Troll King's request than ignore it."

Duo lifted his hands in mock surrender. His eyes were speculative as they rested upon the King. "To tell you the truth, your Majesty, I've not had much luck so far."

"I always knew your reputation was overrated," the King grumbled, but he sounded disappointed behind the barb.

"Think about what I'm up against, though." Duo gestured at a nearby body. "They got together thirty people without any sector around you the wiser; they infiltrated Recyc and found Herb in a few hours, so they must have had blueprints of the place."

"Yeah, I meant to ask you, how the hell did you get-"

"I've been hunting down a couple of these guys for nearly two months now, and this is the first real proof I've seen that they're connected and working for some organization. An organization with the balls to come into Recyc, just because Herb knew the names of a few of their members. Think about it; I know life is cheap here, but that's still a pretty weak reason to execute somebody. Just how deep are they hidden that I've not gotten a whiff of them till now? How badly do they want to stay hidden that they'd ex Herb just for that? You think I can dig them up all on my lonesome?"
The King was silent, examining Duo's face. Freeport's all-pervasive grapevine insured that a curious rat-catcher like Duo and a powerful man like the Troll King heard rumors about every gang and pirate raid of importance anywhere in the Space Sphere. To have something like that evolve right beneath their noses without either being the wiser...

"Seeing how hard they'll be to smoke out, maybe I could use a bit of help...?" Duo dangled this in front of his Majesty with blue eyes wide and as innocent as a newborn lamb's.

The King grunted with ill-humor, but jerked his chin at a couple of corpses behind Duo. "We've collected here all the men we found. There are no other bodies here at present. The sanctity of those bastards is not something I worry about; go ahead and see if you can find anything from them."

"That's good." Duo's eyes were still fixed on the King. "You know what else could help?"

The King crossed his arms over his chest and stared back through his goggles.

"Carver and his little friend Al are going to go into hiding now if they're smart. But I'm closing in on them. These bodies will show me who their friends are; I might be able to ferret them out. To do that, I might need some guys followed, or at least watched."

"Good luck," said the King, tone foreboding.

"I was thinking your Outer Trolls might have better luck than me. I'm just one guy. Well, two, but Chang can't go off on his own, so-"

"I don't like my subjects meddling with matters of the living world," the King growled.

"Those matters just marched right inside your home turf and kicked over the furniture," Duo pointed out, waving a hand at the corpses around them. "That's gotta get you wigging."

The Troll King growled again, sounding like a furious bear.

"I make no promises," he finally said. He spun on his heels before Duo could plead, and walked towards Amos' sheet-covered corpse. The King kicked off the brakes and rolled the gurney towards the other room. He stopped just as the doors swished open. "This secret group...do you have a crappy codename for them as well?" he asked without turning around.

"No, not yet."

"Call them Breakers."

Duo's eyebrows arched. "For breaking and entering?"

"For breaking the unspoken interdict." The Troll King's words were deliberate and dangerous. "For violating the forbidden. For rupturing the thin line between the life of this colony and its death."

"King..." Duo licked his lips, all traces of his usual brazenness gone. "Just because some guys decided to play fast and loose with the rules, don't take it out on the rest of Freeport."

"If you find them, I won't have to."

The wheels of the gurney squeaked and the door closed behind the ruler of the Temple as he took Amos to his Rebirth.

Wufei and Duo shared a somber look.
"What do you think he'll do, if we can't find them? These...Breakers?" Wufei asked.

"I'd really rather not find out," Duo muttered. "Let's get to work. You go through their clothes, do your thing. Pull out anything that looks like a name or a place or a pic. I'll check their faces, see who I recognize."

Wufei nodded and advanced towards the nearest corpse. He leaned over to examine the body without touching it, though such precautions were meaningless considering Freeport's lack of forensics. The man was young, a year or two older than Wufei at most. He'd been impaled on a sharp weapon. Blood had flowed heavily from the wound and pooled on the table beneath him, clotting in the gash and all over the pale skin, which meant he'd still been alive when the Trolls had stripped him and put him on the slab. Wufei examined the face attentively but without feeling. Had he killed this man? Did it matter?

He turned away from the face twisted in agony and rigor mortis to sort through the bloody clothes in the bin at his feet, while Duo moved to take his place and examine the dead man's features.

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The blade flickered white and clean, as if it were being lit by some light source other than the floodlight near the back door.

Wufei frowned. He'd made a small mistake in his footwork. He interrupted the next form, fell back to the centre of the yard and started from the beginning.

Duo had been thoughtfully silent on their way back from Recyc. He'd pounced on the laptop as soon as the door to the apartment had closed behind them, opened up an email program and started typing furiously. Wufei had leaned over his shoulder, only to be told rather curtly to go take a shower and get some sleep. Wufei had stupidly stood there, unwilling to accept the order but also unwilling to cause an argument.

He'd just made another mistake, this time in the depth of his sword swing.

Wufei's next gesture was an irritated slash that had nothing to do with his forms and everything to do with the way life had gotten very complicated in the last twenty-four hours.

He breathed deeply. Motes of dust danced and roiled like the currents of a choppy sea around him, glowing in the faint light. The unusual silence was getting on his nerves; no distant clang of crates, no train howling overhead, no people singing and talking. Even Freeport seemed to have shut up and shut him out at this point.

Reluctant to go sleep while Duo was working, he'd slipped out into the yard to practice his forms. The movements warmed his abused muscles. It hurt, but the forced oxygenation and motion would accelerate healing and allow his body to recuperate faster. He couldn't afford to coddle himself. He had the feeling things were about to get serious with these Breakers who now had Duo and himself in their sights.

The pickings on the dead bodies in the morgue had been slim. Wufei focused on them, letting his disciplined body take him through the motions of the Wushu while his mind riffled through the facts with a detective's detached viewpoint.
Duo had recognized some of the men who'd attacked them. Pirates and thugs for the most part, but some of them were 'just people', as Duo had put it, visibly puzzled. They came from several different sectors, mainly Mooncurse, Kropotkin and Goldman, all sectors heavy in colonists and ex-Rebel populations.

Wufei had found nothing; no wallets, no ID, no laundry chits or shopping lists, no charm with a girlfriend's picture, absolutely nothing.

His fingers tightened on his sword's hilt, causing the blade to dart too far in the Crane Swoop, but he ignored the mistake. That total absence of personal items was highly unusual for pirates, hoods or 'just people'. That was more in keeping with spies and terrorists.

He'd also examined the bodies; quite a few of them were scarred veterans like himself. But some of the scars he'd noted were more recent than the war. Of course they could have been acquired in Freeport; life was violent here. But this group, whoever they were, seemed intent on keeping out of trouble and out of sight of the general populace; they wouldn't go and pick duels and fights to such an extent. So where had they been wounded like that? Some of them looked like they'd been through a war. In the past year.

He didn't like some of the ideas that were coming to mind, but he tried to keep his imagination under control. Proof, they needed proof, and any detective knew that that took an inordinate amount of time to collect. But collect it he must; this was important, as even Trowa would agree when he got Wufei's report. It looked like Wufei wasn't going to leave Freeport any time soon.

He'd made another mistake in the Wushu. His shoulders had hunched and it had thrown the whole form. Pathetic. He'd been doing these moves since he could walk. He marched back to the centre of the yard. Arms loose, breathe in and out. Start.

At the back of his mind, his reason was telling him he'd have to stop soon. He was getting tired, and the next stupid mistake might harm him, canceling out any good the exercise had done him so far. Besides...

Wufei's movements slowed, as the indefinable sense of something wrong crystallized steadily. He'd not heard any typing for awhile now...

His body jerked and twisted on its own, years of cultured reflexes short-circuiting thought. The dagger hit the blade of the sword he'd brought up defensively.

He fell back instantly, before the dagger could slip past the block and plunge into his belly. His blade flicked out, establishing the kill distance around him-

His head finally caught up with his body. Wufei bit off a curse and jerked the sword upwards, away from that dangerous position of parry-retaliation that could kill in an instant. Duo's big serrated dagger had still been in its leather and steel-lined sheath. This wasn't a real attack.

But the smuggler had disappeared! Wufei stared like an idiot at empty space and wondered for a split second if he'd been hallucinating-

His body was still on the edge of battle, though. He spun completely on instinct, sword coming up, but not fast enough to block or riposte the fist that slammed into his shoulder.

He staggered, then went limp, fell and rolled, increasing the distance between them, or trying to anyway. Duo was there already. Wufei twisted on himself, barely dodging a kick.

He lunged and slid across the dirty floor, ignoring the grit of metal specks and oil stains on his bare
hands and chest. He grabbed the scabbard he'd set aside when he'd started his exercise, and sheathed his blade in one smooth movement as he rolled to his feet and into a wary crouch. His hand dropped from the hilt of the sword to a point two thirds up the scabbard, giving him a length approximately the size of Duo's large dagger.

Duo's eyes had been angry before, now they seemed to freeze over into some unnamed fury as they settled on Wufei's hold which put them on equal footing.

The attack was swift and brutal. Wufei could do nothing more than parry; in fact, after the first few seconds he had to put his mind and his objections entirely on hold and let his body take over, the only way to follow and counter the rapid, unpredictable attacks. Duo's style was formless, shifting. Wufei dodged an elbow to the jaw, but his retaliation fell short. Duo was already three steps away and darting towards his unprotected back. He spun, tried to connect with his scabbard; it was like trying to hit the wind. Wufei's free hand shot out and blocked the punch aimed at his stomach, but Duo was away before he could retaliate.

At the back of his mind, an unemotional review of their respective attacks and strategies had already given Wufei the victory. Duo's assaults were impressive and quick, but they relied on immediately defeating the enemy, and Wufei had managed to block him. Wufei only had to dodge and parry until Duo made a mistake or tired himself out, and then Wufei's greater strength and deadly technique would allow him to move in and finish this in one or two blows.

But this wasn't a battle in Recyc, it wasn't a matter of life and death, and Duo wasn't his enemy...

The gap in Wufei's defense wasn't deliberate, but neither was it entirely accidental.

Duo's foot shot out, probably on pure instinct as soon as he sensed the opening. Balance already precarious, Wufei managed one swift blow with the sheathed sword - hitting Duo's thigh - before falling, winded, to the ground. A piece of metal poked him hard in the back. Then Duo was on him. Gloved hands fastened like cuffs on Wufei's wrists. The dagger had gone spinning across the floor, along with the sword.

"You should have told me!" Duo shouted right in his face. "You should have fucking well told me anyway!"

Wufei said nothing, merely stared up, breathless, at the furious mask.

"I would have helped you if it had just been for you! Why does it always have to be for justice and the greater good and never for you?! Why do you have to be so- so predictable! You're fucking hopeless!"

Wufei flinched away from the words and the fist that had dropped his wrist to slam into the metal floor an inch from his head.

"You let them use you! And me! And it's killing you inside and you don't even care!"

With his hand free, Wufei could have broken free. He did nothing, he didn't even jerk away as the fist slammed next to his face again.

They stared at each other, the yard echoing with Duo's harsh breathing. Wufei watched the anger slowly fade from his friend's eyes.

Duo released him and got to his feet. Wufei sat up slowly, but he didn't stand or look up at his friend as the latter turned away.
"Come on," Duo muttered, voice barely audible over the sound of his footsteps as he tramped towards the door. "It's been over twenty four hours since we had a real night's sleep. We're...let's just hit the sack."

Wufei stayed where he was in the oil stains and the rust.

The footsteps paused. There was a scuffling of boots on metal.

"I do trust you, you know." Duo's voice was soft, weary. "You didn't screw up. We can work together. I'm just mad right now, that's all."

Wufei didn't answer, his eyes caught on a twisted piece of scrap metal that might once have been something useful. He could feel Duo shift near the door. Wufei should probably say something. He just didn't know what. He agreed with Duo's words, but his battered, stubborn pride couldn't even produce an apology or some insignificant words of regret. He'd done what he had to. Even Duo knew this. The rest...the rest was the fallout from his duty; he could only accept it.

The smuggler snorted out in sudden amusement that sounded rather forced. "Hey, if nothing else, I trust you to nail Carver, right? That guy is a walking corpse, now that Chang Wufei has him in the grinder. And I trust you to follow your orders and protect me like Trowa told you to, good lil' soldier that you are."

"That's not the only reason I protect you," Wufei whispered, hands blindly brushing off flecks of metal and dirt from his arms.

"Yeah, I know." Duo still wasn't moving. "It's not that I...I don't actually...I do understand why you do it. I guess I even wish I could..."

There it was again, in Duo's stance, in the way his voice had hardened and cut off. That darkness inside, that bitterness turned inwards. Wufei wondered why Duo seemed to be angry with himself when he, Wufei, made such a better target.

"Come on, we need a shower. A real one. That chemical shit we used before is eating into my skin." Duo strode towards the door, his voice even again.

By the time Wufei picked himself up, inspected his scabbard for cracks and cautiously poked his nose into the apartment, Duo and his towel were already gone.

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Wufei toweled off his still-wet hair one last time, still deep in the maze of his tired thoughts. He opened the door as quietly as possible in case Duo was already asleep.

The neon in the kitchen was on to guide him. By its light, he could see Duo already tucked into the sheets, only a ruffle of bangs visible. Wufei switched off the light, gave his damp hair a last swipe and folded the towel neatly onto the rack near the sink. He did the same to the one Duo had tossed onto the counter, then headed towards his sleeping bag.

"Don't be an ass, Chang," the lump under the covers said. "We were doing the horizontal tango only six hours ago. I'm pretty sure that entitles us to share a mattress."
Wufei stared at the dark shape in the bed. His mouth shaped the word 'but', though his voice seemed to have gone AWOL.

"Just get in here. You sleep on the floor now, your muscles'll seize up."

With that workable excuse, Wufei changed his course and headed towards the bed. He slipped between the sheets with a show of confidence he in no way felt. The covers smelled faintly of sweat and semen, which somehow only compounded his inner confusion.

A tremor and quake in the mountain range of blankets brought two sleepy blue eyes into view. "I just gotta say, you're harder to sleep with than Heero."

"What?" Wufei asked weakly.

"You toss and turn and snore-"

"I do not snore," Wufei countered mechanically, because of course he did not.

"Do too. Heero now, he sleeps like the dead. And I mean it. Sometimes I wake up at night and stare at his chest for a couple of minutes just to make sure he's still breathing."

Wufei settled into the covers that were warm with Duo's heat. His skin was just as warmed by the dazed, undeserved relief flooding his body. He'd have settled for going back to their uneasy alliance of the first days, a working relationship of near-strangers and one-time allies. But Duo was having none of that. He wasn't going to pretend that anything in the last two months or the last few hours hadn't happened, either the good or the bad. It was up to them to deal with the consequences.

"I do not snore, Maxwell," Wufei declared slowly and firmly. As words to cement an understanding went, they lacked depth and import, but Wufei realized, with a shiver of something oddly lighthearted for his character, that he didn't give a damn.

Duo snorted gently. "Whatever." There was a moment of stillness, then an arm passed over his abdomen and rested against his skin. The gesture was neutral, until it suddenly pinched him teasingly and withdrew. Wufei caught the hand briefly, a short caress in passing, his fingers tracing the juncture of a wrist and palm. A silent thanks for the unspoken truce and the measure of forgiveness he in no way deserved.

"Let's sleep. I'm bushed," Duo muttered. Still some constraint there; even Duo's phenomenal abilities to bounce back were being tested by these circumstances. But Wufei preferred Duo's passing anger to his permanent mistrust any day.

The sheets rustled as they both settled, gingerly trying to gather the bedding without appearing to hog them. The blanket was a bit short on the sides. Wufei hadn't noticed when they'd shared it before. They carefully negotiated the few inches between them to the point where they were both comfortable with the new distance.

Silence - as much as was available in Freeport, which was not much - descended. For a few seconds.

"And you do snore, buddy."

"Humph."
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Oh Marlène
C'est la haine qui nous a amené là
Mais Marlène
Dans tes veines coulent l'amour des soldats
Et quand il meurent ou s'endorment
C'est dans le creux de tes bras
Qu'ils s'abandonnent et qu'ils brûlent
Comme une clope entre tes doigts

...Et quand il meurent ou s'endorment
Dans la chaleur de tes bras
Ça les apaise et les traîne
Jusqu'en dehors des combats."

(Oh Marlène
It's hate that brought us here
But Marlène
In your veins runs the love of soldiers
When they die or fall asleep
It's in your arms
That they abandon themselves and burn
Like the cigarette between your fingers

... When they die or fall asleep
It's the warmth of your arms
That appeases them and drags them
Away from the battle)
---Noirs Désirs, 'Marlène'

Wufei was awake instantly, though his well-trained body didn't betray the fact. A quick tally, cold as any computer's, added up snippets of information in his mind.

Bed - empty.
Duo? Gone.
Door opening slowly.
Sword on the floor just below the bed. Easy reach.

Wufei stayed perfectly still, his breathing regular and slow, his eyes barely open a crack as they rested on the door. It swung open with only the faintest whine and in walked Duo in complete
silence.

Wufei still didn't move, though his battle readiness slunk back into its kennel. Eyes barely open, he watched Duo move towards the workbench as if by observing him now, while Duo was unaware of his gaze, he could unlock the other man's inner thoughts.

Duo was moving a bit stiffly. The sight reminded Wufei of his own abused body, which was giving him the tab for the extra fight he'd indulged in right before bed. Duo looked tired, his face guarded even now that he was home. He was wearing the leather coat again, and he hadn't tossed it off at the door like he usually did. Wufei wondered if it was significant, then wondered when he'd gotten so desperate to understand this man that he was willing to read signs and portents into Duo's choice of clothing.

Duo froze after only half a dozen silent steps, eyes narrowed as he glanced quickly towards the bed. Wufei's eyes were shut once more. He could feel Duo staring at him.

"You're awake, aren't you."

The words were loud after the total silence that had followed Duo's footsteps until now. Wufei's eyes flickered open in surprise as much as in admission.

Duo arched an eyebrow at him and looked on the verge of saying something tart...but instead, the smuggler walked over to the workbench, dropped a bag on it, switched on the light there and shouldered off his coat. When he turned around in a wrinkled shirt and ratty pants, his smile and clear blue eyes were unperturbed. Yet Wufei was once more left with a vague unease that he couldn't even begin to justify.

Duo reached back and grabbed the plastic bag, which he swung lightly while he marched towards the bed.

"Move over," he ordered.

When Wufei cleared his side of the bed, taking the spot against the wall, Duo sat down on the covers and toed off his running shoes.

"I got breakfast," he announced.

Wufei wasn't going to complain if he didn't have to eat energy bars this morning, but he wondered if they shouldn't talk about all the things that had happened between them yesterday.

By the time he sorted out a few words, Duo had something fished out of the bag and ready to shove into Wufei's opened mouth. Wufei jerked back instinctively and thumped his head against the wall. The lump above his ear stung right on cue. Duo snickered and waved the pale piece of whatever in front of Wufei's nose where he couldn't even get a proper look at it.

"Eat up. After all that shit in Recyc yesterday, I thought we deserved a little something extra this morning."

Wufei looked past the fingers trying to coax something into his mouth and stared into an open, teasing expression. Apparently Duo didn't particularly want to talk about anything serious. As for Wufei, he would rather have a root canal without anesthetic than talk about all the possible pitfalls between them. He'd follow Duo's lead. If things looked dicey, if their survival and effectiveness might be compromised by any trouble between them, then they could talk. Or, more likely, go out back in the yard and finish last night's 'discussion'. Whatever it took...
He reached for the bite-sized piece of food, but Duo, with a wicked grin, kept it out of his reach and opened his mouth suggestively. Wufei rolled his eyes in annoyance but still obeyed the unspoken command.

Bread, Wufei identified after a couple of chews. And not the coarse, mealy grey stuff the commissary handed out; light, salty and firm beneath his teeth. Duo tore off another piece of the loaf and held it in his mouth while he unscrewed the lid on a small pot of honey he'd also extracted from the bag. He dipped the bread into the jar precariously balanced on the covers.

"I got lucky," he mumbled around a small mouthful. "Trostklein just made a few loaves and he owes me for the refrigerator I fixed. I got the honey from him too. Want some more?"

"Sure. Shouldn't we sit at the counter?" Wufei tracked a trickle of honey as it slowly dripped from Duo's piece of bread onto the bed.

Duo curled his legs under the covers and half reclined against the nearest pillow. "Need to wash the sheets anyway," he said with a shrug, handing Wufei a bigger chunk of bread and the pot of honey.

Wufei preferred rice, vegetables or soup for breakfast rather than something sweet, but this was an unexpected pleasure after months of Freeport's bland cuisine. He watched the spillover of honey, translucent in the light from the workbench, drizzle from his bread into the jar.

Duo licked his fingers with an over loud and satisfied sound, and then reached under the cushion Wufei was presently leaning on. Wufei's eyebrows arched as Duo drew out and opened a flick knife with a practiced twist of the wrist. The smuggler produced an orange from the bag with a flourish. The color of it was a warm, tempting glow in the half-light. It looked fresh and juicy. Wufei was instantly thirsty just looking at it.

"Do I want to know who you killed for that?" Damn, he hadn't tasted anything fresh since he'd arrived in this remote colony. Perishable imports cost too much.

"Nah. You wouldn't enjoy it near as much." Duo started peeling carefully.

"Am I, in turn, going to owe you my life for half an orange?" Wufei asked sarcastically. His taste buds, tempted by the smell and tiny droplets the knife was releasing, were telling him it would be well worth it.

There was the slightest hesitation of the knife as it sliced through grainy orange skin.

"Maybe something less bloody and more pleasant all around," Duo leered.

Despite the smirk and the bold words, it was in fact a question. Blue eyes flickered towards his tentatively as the knife removed the last piece of peel.

Oh... Wufei's first thought was that this was a bit sudden, considering their fight last night. But this was Duo. This was the way he was; the smuggler bounced back like some blasted elastic. Whatever happened, he grabbed what he could from the here and now and dealt with the consequences as they arose. He was either a blithe opportunist of the first water or he was wiser in the ways of life than many a philosopher; Wufei hadn't decided yet.

Did Wufei want this? He hesitated an instant, caught between two conflicting forces. He was still sore from all the fighting yesterday, and his cold reason reminded him of all the possible complications that a more intimate relationship between them could bring. But wisdom, doubts and hesitation burned to cinders in the sudden flash of heat that tingled through his body. All he could really think of, right at this moment, watching agile fingers sectioning the orange, was a hard touch,
strong muscles flexing, and a freedom so absolute it was breathtaking. A shiver ran across his shoulders.

They'd fought side by side, closer than anybody they'd let into their battle-hardened lives. They'd gotten even closer afterwards. Wufei had spilled the details of his duty and his life and Duo had accepted his lies and his sins without belittling sympathy, with the anger they deserved, with the forgiveness they didn't...One of those reasons would surely explain why Wufei's vaunted control was crumbling even without the excuse of an adrenaline rush. Wufei wasn't sure why, really. All he knew was that this was still 'no strings attached', an affair between warriors. It would not interfere with their hunt, because they wouldn't let it. Wufei would be leaving soon, once the mission was over. There would be no regrets on either side when he left for anything they did or didn't do. Seen in that light...surely it didn't really matter...

"I'm sure we can come to some arrangement," Wufei said, rolling on to his stomach and staring up at Duo over his shoulder. He was trying for tempting, but it probably came out predatory. He'd never been very good at playing those kinds of games.

He thought he caught the slightest swallow from Duo. Not so sure of ourselves after all, Maxwell?

"About that," Duo muttered, staring at the sectioned orange. His index finger was rubbing over the blunt edge of his flick knife's blade.

"Yes?" Wufei prompted when Duo fell silent. Maybe he'd misread the situation.

"What you said when we-... before. You really don't mind? Being-..."

A memory of a few ugly words echoed in Wufei's mind, but his voice was steady as he supplied the end of the sentence, or probably a more polite variant than Duo would have used.

"Being topped, you mean?"

"Yeah."

Wufei wasn't sure he liked the way the finger was dancing over the flick knife. As nervous gestures went, that didn't rate as very reassuring.

"No, I don't mind. I prefer it that way."

"Oh." Duo's hand dropped to wipe the blade and orange juice carelessly on the covers. "Well. Takes all kinds, I guess."

"Takes at least two to start with," Wufei concurred.

That got him a startled look and a laugh.

"I won't ask you to switch," Wufei added.

"Never did it before. That way." Duo's words were short.

"It's not for everybody."

Duo snorted harshly. Wufei reminded himself that in Duo's world, being taken was probably not often a matter of taste or choice. In the slums, what was visible of sex would more often than not boil down to possession, prostitution or rape. An older Duo would know about encounters between equals, but that probably equated to 'take turns' in his mind. Childhood demons were powerful. How
would Duo’s gut instinct, as opposed to his intellect and experience since, interpret someone who
would accept the role of ‘victim’ every time?

"Does my preference cheapen me in your eyes?" Wufei asked, keeping his voice neutral and non-
aggressive.

Duo dropped the flick blade and put the freed hand over his crotch in a theatrically alarmed gesture.
"Didn't we go over that yesterday?"

Wufei looked at him steadily until the mocking grin had faded into an honest, slightly exasperated
one.

"Chang, you couldn't do anything cheap - or fake, or bent - if you tried."

Wufei realized, from the threads of residual anger in Duo's voice, that they weren't only talking about
sex any more.

"I am honored that you think so," he whispered, staring down at the pillow. It was probably more
than he deserved.

"Oy, don't go all mushy on me," Duo growled, picking up the flick knife. An idle toss nailed it to the
opposite wall.

"Duo," Wufei complained. He'd been brought up to believe that there were certain things one didn't
do in a house, and target practice was one of them.

Duo retaliated by sinuously wiggling down to Wufei's level on the sheets and trying to feed him a
piece of orange. It banished the shadow that had drifted over them for an instant. No need to taint
something simple with all the problems that still lay between them. Wufei decided to take a page
from Duo's book and grab the here and now with both hands. For starters, he rolled over onto his
side and managed to filch the orange section out of Duo's fingers. He put it in his own mouth with a
vindicated sniff.

Duo made a moue of disappointment.

"Feeding someone with your fingers is supposed to be sexy," he pointed out. "Chicks dig that kind
of stuff."

"I'll let you figure out the flaw in that statement on your own."

The orange was a little watery, but living in Freeport lowered one's expectations. Wufei reached out
for another section and Duo, mouth full and chewing slowly and dreamily, let him have it without
any further misguided attempt at 'sexy'. Not that Wufei was inherently opposed to sexy, or as he
preferred to term it, sensual...For Wufei, sex and pleasuring another were serious matters, and he
didn't like to do things in less than perfect conditions. He remembered the last time he'd been with
Lance, at the man's small house in Monaco, with the scent of jasmine tea floating in the air and the
Mediterranean sunlight flooding through the bay window onto the bed...

Wufei glanced around the small, practical apartment with its engine oil smells blending with
Freeport's aroma, the harsh, dirty sheets under his body, the mess on the workbench and the knife
planted in the wall. He breathed deeply and licked his fingers, letting the citrus scent tease his senses.
One learned to weed out the Freeport stink eventually... he opened his eyes to find blue ones
traveling slowly from his lips to his exposed chest.

His skin tingled, a familiar warmth teased his belly and inner thighs. Screw the setting. The only
thing that could put a crimp in his plans for Duo would be to have lost the lube after he'd dropped it yesterday.

Duo's mouth tasted like the orange they'd just finished between them. There was stubble beneath Wufei's palm, a faint scratching sensation. The kiss was relaxed; there would be no frantic hustle this time. Wufei was going to do this right.

He twisted closer to Duo without giving up the delicious coiling of tongues. The sheets around his legs resisted as he tried to curl around Duo and pull them flush together. There was a rustle of plastic and something fell over.

Wufei broke the kiss and glanced down at the plastic bag between them. The bread had tumbled out of it, but Duo had snagged the open honey pot just as it was about to tip over.

"Nice catch," Wufei muttered, glaring at the interruption.

"Sex is great, but nobody in Freeport wastes good food no matter what," Duo answered with a cheeky grin, righting the jar and screwing it shut.

"Then go and put the good food away while I hunt for the lube. And pick up the orange peels, they're all over the place now."

"Yes boss."

"And stop calling me boss."

"Sure thing, boss."

The lubricant was under the bed, and Duo was back in it in record time, having swapped the food for a familiar foil-wrapped disk instead. Wufei found himself hauled back into the sheets and soundly kissed before he could figure out where to stash the lube and condom until they were needed.

"You know," Duo gasped, breaking away slightly. "I'm still of two minds about this."

His tone didn't sound serious enough to alarm Wufei, but he did lean back to stare questioningly into blue eyes.

"On the one hand, you've got to be the hottest gay guy I ever met. On the other hand, my brain is screaming 'You're kissing Wufei!', which is just, like, weird, and also reminding me I don't have life insurance."

"Idiot," Wufei muttered, pulling him into another kiss. It did feel strange doing this with a friend and ally who'd been off limits for months. Wufei wasn't about to stop though. He rolled onto his back and pulled Duo onto him.

Ahhh, this was it. One of the things he liked the most about sex. That first full-body contact, that solid weight of another man on him. Duo was lighter than he was, lighter than his other lovers to date, but there was something real and comforting about his presence, the solid feel of muscles as Duo shifted and took some of his weight on his forearms.

Wufei let his hands wander, following the lure of an unknown body waiting to be explored under that bulky grey sweater. A new lover to discover, new ways of pleasure to be found...What the hell had he been thinking that first time? That had been a mess, it had lasted no time at all, it had been hurried and he barely remembered the feel of Duo's body. Now he was going to do this properly.
His hands traced muscles, tendons, found the hidden soft spots at the juncture of Duo's arms, at his belt-line, in the fine line between dorsal muscles....His fingers also tripped over the large sheathed dagger Duo had strapped to his back, and occasionally fell into pits in the flesh left by the explosion that had torn off Duo's fingers.

Duo's tongue had gotten more aggressive, stabbing into Wufei's mouth, pushing and probing. Shivers ran through the body covering Wufei's. Finally Duo reared back to his knees and impatiently fumbled both his t-shirt and sweater off. Wufei sat up and helped him unbuckle the knife's strap. It joined Wufei's sword on the floor next to the bed.

Wufei started to explore again, this time with his eyes as well as his fingertips, but Duo shoved him back impatiently against the mattress. Hands fumbled at the waist of Wufei's sweats. Wufei curved his hips up, letting himself be stripped. He didn't like the passive role, but instincts were telling him that Duo might not be up for a really long, complicated and involved foreplay. There was tension in the shoulders he touched. Wufei didn't think that Duo had as much experience as he had, particularly not with men. There was something like a self-imposed challenge, nearly bravado, in the rough hands that explored Wufei's skin in turn, quick and curious. Then they jerked away to unlock Duo's prosthetic glove and peel them both off, fingers impatient for skin-to-skin contact. The gloves were carefully added to the pile made by the sword and the dagger. Then Duo's hands were on him again, exploring for good this time.

Wufei flinched away slightly when fingers brushed his scarred chest.

"Does it hurt?" Duo murmured curiously.

"No. It just feels...numb," Wufei answered, trying to put down in words the sense of not-quite-discomfort the grafted skin relayed to him.

Duo's hand drifted away from that area, but paused at the choppy shore that led from the waves of keloid scarring to the planes of Wufei's normal skin. A curious finger drifted down the line between the two, along both sensitive and scarred skin. Wufei shuddered. Duo might not know his way around a man's body as well as Wufei did, but he did know wounds, and the strange tingling sensitivity of the edges of scar tissue. The full lips curled into a feral grin, narrowed blue eyes tracked his every reaction, dropping occasionally to Wufei's erection.

Wufei let him play for awhile, then he took things under his control again, his fingers passing skillfully over Duo's chest, nipples and hips until the hands on Wufei were merely shivering and gripping him. Then he expertly rolled Duo onto his side and got him out of his thick pants, socks and underwear.

Duo was breathing fast and hard now, staring up at Wufei. The latter let his hands examine the rest of Duo's body, making the breath catch and falter in Duo's throat.

The smell, feel, taste and sight of Duo's skin filled Wufei's senses. He liked men. He liked their aesthetic, he liked their strength, he liked the taste of their skin, the way muscles played beneath it, their strong bones, their rough hands. He liked the rigid line of their sex. He liked it in him.

Wufei reached for the lube he'd stuck between their pillows. The oil was cool against his fingers; the air in the room was freezing compared to the heat that burned beneath his skin. If they were going to do this a few more times in the future, maybe Duo could invest in a heater. Wufei's muscles, still sore and stiff from yesterday's battles, were clenching under the effect of the chill and excitement.

As Duo watched raptly, Wufei sat back a bit and slid his oiled finger gently in and around the anal muscles. He concentrated on the feeling, the slow buildup of pleasure, but he didn't miss the way
Duo's hands were twitching, the muscles in his arms bunching and shifting. He wasn't surprised when Duo sat up, pulled Wufei's hand away and flipped him onto his back. He handed Duo the bottle without much hesitation. Wufei normally preferred to prepare himself, and his lovers certainly didn't mind watching, but Duo just wasn't the kind to stay passive. Wufei realized that he didn't particularly mind, though Duo better not expect Wufei to just lie down and take it for long. Not his style either.

Fingers breached the muscles and probed a bit cautiously. Wufei set the pace by rising up to his elbows and using the leverage to push down on the digits. Duo adapted quickly, moving his fingers in a way that indicated he had done this at least a few times before. Wufei thought of those fingers in him. Hard, callused, nails blunted by hours working delicately at mechanisms or driving a knife into someone's gut- his erection jumped, his arms supporting his body trembled. Deathscythe was one lucky Gundam, Wufei thought, the small, rather dirty irony making his lips curl upwards. That strange wild freedom brushed his skin again like a cold, clean wind, making him shiver, breathless...

Wufei fell back on the mattress and fumbled blindly for the lube again, pawing the rumpled sheets until his fingers touched plastic. Duo's fingers were still working the sphincter muscles, more confident now, occasionally reaching far enough to press the inner skin and send sensations shooting up through Wufei's stomach and down through his thighs. Duo's damaged hand trailed lightly up and down Wufei's cock, teasing one last time, then he let go, pulled his other fingers away as well and reached for the condom.

Wufei's lubed palm quickly coated Duo's erection between their bodies. Duo licked his lips, eyes bright and wide, and grabbed Wufei's hip.

He wasn't expecting the next move, not that he stood a chance anyway. Wufei outweighed him and had a better notion of leverage and holds. Duo gave out a strangled 'Hey!', eyes wide and slightly alarmed, as he found himself flat on his back with Wufei straddling him.

"Relax," Wufei said calmly. His fingers reached behind him for Duo's cock, pressed it against his skin.

Duo licked his lips and then grinned a bit sharply. "Whatever you say... boss." His voice was hoarse and uneven but still ready with that blasted last word.

Stop calling me boss if you want to keep your teeth, was what Wufei was surely going to say in retort, but Duo's cock against his anal muscles - pressure/pleasure/pain - robbed him of breath, and then Duo twitched his hips up- the thick head sank in and slid up into Wufei's ass and he forgot he was even going to say anything at all.

Duo's hands were on his hips now, tugging a bit, teetering between impatience and a cautious gentleness that warmed Wufei's skin as much as a caress.

Duo wasn't as thick as some of his lovers, which gave Wufei the opportunity to go quick and hard if he wanted to. But he was long enough to reach Wufei's sweet spot; Wufei shuddered and paused, small motions rubbing Duos' erection there again and again. His head was back, his hair was tickling his shoulder blades, his whole skin was so sensitive he thought he could feel the whorls of Duo's fingertips pressing into his flesh... This... was good... hmmm... .

He kept that up until Duo finally whimpered and hauled him down hard. Wufei's eyes shot open, in time to see the glaze of pleasure in blue eyes fade into a rather worried scrutiny.

"Sorry," Duo gasped, "was that too-"
Wufei didn't use his hands, which were still exploring Duo's firm abdomen and chest; his legs alone flexed and lifted him and brought him down hard and fast again. Duo's words were lost in a breathless gasp.

"Too fast? I don't think so," Wufei said before doing it again. "I'm tougher than you are, Maxwell."

The hands were no longer cautious and gentle on his hips. Wufei shook with sheer pleasure at the strength in the forearms he was now gripping to stabilize himself as Duo took over, hard.

"You're so-... full of yourself-... Chang!"

There was a neat rejoinder to that, but Wufei didn't have the breath any more. More than the cock screwing him hard, it was the power of Duo's movements meeting his own that was robbing him of thought...Always- Wufei had always been stronger than his lovers - never slept with colleagues or other warriors- oh!...Always had to be the one in control, the one who set the limit and watched it...The intoxicating differences he found in Duo - ally, friend, killer, lover- were nibbling away at that control...

He was gripping the corded forearms, using them to lean back into the movement. The pace was quick and sure now, not under his unique volition; a blend of two powers. Wufei forced himself past the pure excitement and delight, made himself breathe regularly, using the chi to spread pleasure throughout his body while keeping a tight leash on his climax.

Duo didn't have that discipline. The movement changed brutally. Strong arms shook free of Wufei's grasp to grip him higher about the waist, pulling Duo up as he pressed Wufei down hard against his cock. Breath short, hard gasps, the lean body curled around Wufei's, shuddering, hauling him down. Teeth pressed against his skin of his chest but not biting, Duo was too out of breath.

Wufei clenched the muscles around the erection inside him, providing the spark to ignite the blast. Fingers scrabbled at his waist and Duo's muscles jerked and spasmed as Wufei held him close, bliss in the throbbing pulse inside, the ragged groan, the power exploding and seeping inside of him.

He continued to move, fingers reaching for his own erection, but Duo whimpered and fell back, twisting away and pulling out.

"Just sec, just a sec," Duo panted.

Wufei let his hand fall, and watched the breathless man beneath him expectantly. Duo was limp, his hand trembled as he shoved his bangs back. Wufei felt a flicker of satisfaction. Sex was an occasional pastime for him, a pleasure to indulge in when time and duty permitted, but he liked to do it properly and make sure his partner had no complaints at the end.

Duo finally got rid of the condom, rolled over and shoved Wufei gently back into the mattress. The cheap springs of the bed had been making a background choir to the ride, and they squeaked with something like protest and fatigue at Wufei's weight. Wufei hadn't thought of the solidity of the frame earlier, but he was starting to wonder about it now.

There was an evil grin on Duo's face which dragged Wufei's attention back to him. Duo's hands fastened on Wufei's hips again, pushed him into the position Duo wanted with insolent strength, so that Wufei's groin was near the other man's chin.

Oh yes, Duo had mentioned something about going down on him yesterday. Said it would be good.

The evil smirk wrapped itself around Wufei's erection. Duo's hand explored the base of his cock, his balls...
Duo went down on him slowly - bloody slowly! Wufei's well-disciplined body didn't thrust or wiggle, but he wanted to. It was the way Duo's fingers ghosted over his skin first, flickering first where his mouth would follow; it sensitized the skin even more, it promised and teased - it was surprising because he didn't think Duo had that much experience. Maybe he liked giving head which was good because he wasn't bad at it - oh! - notbadatall-

Duo moved; an elbow shoved Wufei's leg away and up, and suddenly there were fingers in Wufei, probing hard, just as Duo's tongue started doing something truly evil.

Wufei swallowed and realized his hands were on Duo's head, and had been for several minutes now. He'd never liked his own head held down, so he had every intention of letting go when Duo's fingers suddenly thrust deeper - hard! Yes! - and hit his prostate and -

All the way down now - just how many tongues did Duo have?! Oh, fingers- as well- damn-

Wufei felt the air crystallize in his lungs, expanding and pressing outwards. He knew, he just knew that Duo was going to do...something, any second now...Those seconds slammed by like a frantic heartbeat, Duo dragging it out, tongue still doing that, and then - pressure against every inch of Wufei's cock as Duo sucked once, hard, deftly let go with a sensuous trail of lips as his hand took over and- fucked Wufei with his fingers, hard and deep-

-ohhellyes!-

Wufei panted, staring at the pretty flashes of light in his vision. He had hair all over his face. He'd tossed around when-

...He hoped he hadn't actually yelped that out loud...That would be embarrassing...

He tried to focus his eyes. The shadows that shrouded the ceiling weren't giving him any indication if he was succeeding or not.

"You look like you been sucker-punched."

Wufei lifted a hand and whacked the nearest piece of Duo he could find, which turned out to be a shoulder.

"You are good at that," Wufei admitted breathlessly.

"Yeah. A friend gave me some pointers, back from when she was selling it in a primo cat-house. I tell you what though..." A hand passed gently through Wufei's hair, helping him get it out of his face...and suddenly gripped it and tilted his head back until he was blinking, startled, into sharp, hard eyes. "You just joined a small, select gang of guys I'd do that to. And none of them ever paid me for it."

"Good," Wufei muttered, his mouth and brain not having quite connected yet. "With my salary I'd never afford it."

The lips curved up into a smile like a dagger, then crushed his own. Wufei tasted orange.

"Gotta admit though, you're pretty good yourself," Duo drawled after releasing him. A hand brushed down Wufei's unscarred side, lingered over a hipbone.

"Hmm. Thank you," Wufei answered, still a bit dazed.

"You got somebody regular on the Outside?" Duo asked in a voice that was just a bit too casual.
"If you mean, am I in a committed relationship, then no, of course not," Wufei retorted reprovingly without opening his eyes.

"Well, that's what I thought, but you really do seem to know what you're doing, so I-"

"I do have regular lovers, but I doubt that's what you meant."

"Lovers?" Duo said after a short silence, stressing the plural.

"I lead a hectic life and live in six different locations on Earth and in Space. I have friends in some of them."

"Sweet Mary Mother of Christ, you telling me you got a wife- a guy in every port?"

Wufei thwacked the shoulder again, eyelids flickering open to glare. "What do you think I am, a sailor?"

"Well, you're a Preventer, same diff- ouch, stop doing that. Man, Chang Wufei sleeps around. I'm sorry, this completely changes my conception of the universe. Maybe even the law of physics."

"I do not sleep around," Wufei corrected with dignity, not bothering to honor the rest of the comment with a reply. "I have friends - two, at this point in time - with whom I entertain sexual relations when I'm not on duty and we are available for each other."

"...Friends with benefits. Okay."

Wufei disliked that term immensely, but let it pass for once.

"I choose them carefully," he continued sternly, "to make sure they are not likely to compromise themselves emotionally over a relationship, and of course I vet them through Preventer security."

Duo's eyes had been getting progressively rounder. Finally he blinked and then thumped his fist against his chest. "Oh, the romance," he stated sardonically.

Wufei gave him an ascetic look. "Romance is not something any of us are looking for. As for the check, I am part of the Preventers Special forces; it is incumbent of me to take certain precautions. It's not something I question."

Liar, a part of him whispered. He felt like a rat each time he fingerprinted the glass stolen from a nice young man who'd approached him and invited him out for a drink. Wufei would be agreeable with him throughout the evening, and set up tentative meetings for later, pleasant and demure, promising to be something he wasn't because he'd follow the man home like some kind of creepy predator afterwards, to check the address and neighbors. Heero was the one who did the actual data check. Wufei asked his partner to do this because he knew Yuy would remain objective, and it was his life on the line too if it were some kind of entrapment. But behind the reasons and the precaution, the twist of pure, undiluted embarrassment at asking Heero to do this for him was probably penance for his behavior...

And then of course there were the three occasions he'd been alone in a town he didn't know, went to some club or other, found someone of like mind and went to the nearest alley to fuck their lights out with no names mentioned. Take them hard and fast and leave while they were still gasping for breath.

...Four times. He'd done that four times. And one of these days, after a particularly bad brush with corruption he couldn't fix or some man he couldn't arrest, one of these days he was probably going
do it again.

Wufei lifted a hand to trail it down Duo's arm, connecting with the 'now', an antidote to the feelings that pushed him to do that. He turned slightly on the pillow to find Duo watching him curiously.

"And what about you?" Wufei asked.

"Oh, I get around," Duo answered with a hint of arrogance.

Wufei picked up the lube from its nest in the sheets. "I did notice that this is half-empty."

"Yeah." Duo's face was suddenly suspiciously blank.

"Though I also noticed there's a couple of greasy thumbprints on the back of it. Engine grease," Wufei added, turning the bottle over.

"Well-"

"You used this for your mechanics?"

"What, you a detective now?"

"Yes, I am, as a matter of fact. What's wrong, did you run out of the regular stuff? Does it work well as an engine lubricant?"

"It's crap- but I have used it for sex!" Duo added defensively.

"How many times?"

"Often enough," Duo answered, eyes narrowed and challenging. Once, Wufei interpreted, maybe twice. In all likelihood Duo had acquired the lube for one specific person. Wufei wondered who that was.

"Mostly it's chicks," Duo added, still defensive.

"You did say you were bisexual."

"Huh-uh." Duo's eyes were turned inwards. He rolled onto his back and glared at the ceiling. "Actually...sometimes I think I rather like guys more. I understand the way they think and what they like...I feel...just more, I guess. It's just that girls, you know where you stand with them. It's easy, and everybody gets what they want. Men- a lot of the guys I meet, they get ideas."

"Ideas?" Wufei prompted, though he suddenly had a good idea of what Duo was talking about.

"I got long hair and I'm smaller than them, so they think that makes me the cunt. Oh- Shit, I'm sorry."

"I've heard a lot worse," Wufei said, examining the black thumbprints on the lube.

"No, I'm sorry." A hand covered the bottle, removed it from his fingers, then cupped his face. "I shouldn't have said that. That doesn't belong here. That doesn't go anywhere near you."

"We'd already determined that," Wufei smirked. He found that he liked the gentle, regretful expression in Duo's eyes though. It soothed the unacknowledged hurt that Duo's cold words had caused last night.

The kiss and grope that followed were rather nice too...
Duo fell back with a sigh, just as Wufei was starting to get warm again.

"I'm bushed. Mind if we sleep a bit more? I only had five hours, and it was a busy day before that."

Wufei's conscience immediately kicked up a fuss. "What about the investigation?"

"I got antennas out there. I sent out some mails last night, warning the rat-catcher network, and I did more than get breakfast this morning." Duo said on a yawn, compounding Wufei's guilt at having done nothing but sleep. "But I doubt things will turn up right away. We got time for a nap."

Wufei agreed, and watched Duo curl up under the covers. The smuggler was asleep in minutes.

He could use some more rest as well, but he took a moment to savor the feeling of a warm body nearby, the movements of somebody else in the bed, movements that were beginning to feel familiar. This was nice. He'd never been in any long-term relationship after his first forgettable lover; only a series of one-night stands that were generally with the same people for reasons of security and practicality.

Not that he was going anywhere near a relationship with Duo. He'd be leaving Freeport eventually.

And coming back for future missions, his desire whispered insidiously.

Would Duo accept that kind of connection? Be another of Wufei's stops on a mostly solitary journey? Duo hadn't mentioned any commitments of his own, but he was a master of saying much while actually giving out little information when he wanted to.

Wufei didn't normally care that much about other people's past affairs... And this time was no different, he told himself sternly, as his eyes drifted towards the bump of Duo's hip under the sheet. The covers had slipped when Duo had rolled over onto his right side. There was only a corner of the sheet over that name that Duo had considered sufficiently important to etch into his skin.

None of Wufei's business.

Really none at all.

Wondering just where the hell his discipline had gotten to since he'd started to live with Duo, Wufei gently teased the sheet away from the pale spacer skin. He didn't even try to pretend this was information gathering, or anything more than prurient curiosity.

The old, crude tattoo was barely readable in the darkness of the room. Wufei angled his head to get a better look. It wasn't a name. There were four short words on two uneven lines.

Ni Dieux
Ni Maitres

Wufei realized he had a strange, rather stupid smile on his lips as he pulled the sheet and then the cover over Duo's legs. Just so... Duo.

But he should take this as a warning. Wufei's gaze trailed from the hidden tattoo to the strong arms, the rough, able hands. Duo wasn't anybody's lover, certainly not Wufei's, except in the most immediate, carnal sense. He was a dangerous adrenaline junky, an excellent killer, a warrior to the tips of his fingers and an anarchist to the bottom of his soul. Wufei would do well to remember that.

He settled down next to the still form, hoping that this knowledge would be enough to stop him from getting into a serious emotional mess with the deadly bundle of chaos at his side. Because that, above
all else, would be a Very Bad Idea.

Chapter End Notes

For anyone who doesn’t know or can’t read French, 'Ni Dieux Ni Maitres' is an old rallying cry from the French revolution which translates as 'Neither Gods, Nor Masters'. It was used as an anarchist motto by Daniel Guérin and other anarchists later.
Chapter 26

"The main question is not what motive inspired the law, but what it will be possible for men of bad motive to do with the law..."
---Benjamin Tucker

Wufei caught Duo's punch on his forearm and retaliated on instinct.

"Sloppy," he said shortly.

A growl was his only answer. Duo stepped back and rubbed his side where Wufei's knuckles had impacted.

Wufei put one hand behind his back, lifted the other towards Duo. "Try again."

Duo gave his ribs one last rub and fell into a pose that was almost, but not quite, completely wrong. Wufei managed not to say anything. That dangerous little light was back in Duo's eyes. Now would not be a good time for Wufei to drop his guard and play mentor. This was the flip side of their training sessions, the demon that needed to be let out...

Duo's fist lashed out, punching into Wufei's open palm. Wufei didn't say anything; they both knew the blow had been all over the place.

The ensuing spark of self-directed annoyance ignited the fight Wufei had been half-expecting.

This time it wasn't a formal punch but a low roundhouse kick that was aimed at him. Wufei deflected it, and then he had his hands full. He fell back, bending into the short sharp blows and absorbing their kinetic energy while parrying.

It degenerated into a down and dirty tussle. Wufei caught Duo's wrist and pinned him into a hold, but he collected a few bruises and what felt like a bite mark to boot.

"You fight like a rat, Maxwell." Here in the yard, those kinds of words could be said. This was the space and the time for it.

"You fight like a fucking cadet, Chang," Duo countered, breathing hard. Wufei could feel him testing the hold, seeing if there were any weaknesses in the grip on him. "You think you can pull off this martial arts shit in the streets?"

"I do and I have," Wufei retorted, shoving Duo away before the smuggler could break free. "Enough?"

"Hmmm." Duo flexed his shoulder and then gave Wufei a piercing look. "You tell me."

"I'm fine," Wufei grunted.

If he were pressed, he'd have had to admit that he liked this recent habit of theirs, these 'training sessions'. He liked being able to vent some of his frustration, he liked to have a moment where he didn't have to watch his words, where they could both lash out if they felt like it. If he were tortured, he'd even admit that it was as satisfying as meditation in some violent, primal way; but since Duo didn't have a set of red-hot pokers on his person, Wufei wasn't about to confess anything of the sort.
"My turn then." A knife appeared in Duo's hand as if it had materialized there. His body language wasn't threatening though; his momentary anger had passed. He wouldn't let fly while he had a weapon in his hand.

"We should go eat," Wufei hedged.

"You need to practice the moves I showed you." Duo flicked the butterfly knife around his fingers.
"What kind of student are you?"

"A reluctant one," was the grumbled answer. Duo was showing him how to use the small knife street-fighter style, in exchange for Wufei's lessons in more formal martial forms (or his 'smooth Kung Fu moves', as Duo so disrespectfully put it). Now there might be times, particularly in Freeport, where being able to kill quickly, quietly and in close quarters with a hidden knife would be very useful. That didn't mean Wufei had to be enthusiastic about his 'lessons'.

"We'll do it tonight, before hitting the sack," Duo decided, glancing at his watch and then flipping the knife shut and making it vanish as magically as it had appeared. "Let's go eat." He sounded perfectly relaxed now; a contrast to the snarling, biting bundle Wufei had been trying to pin down just two minutes ago. Wufei sighed inwardly and followed in silence.

Duo trotted up the three steps form yard to apartment, went to hit the 'Start' buttons on the microwave, then practically ran to the workbench, grabbed his thick sweater and slipped it on over his sweat-damp t-shirt. He rubbed his arms vigorously and shivered.

"I didn't think it was possible, but it's actually colder inside than it is out there," he groaned.

Wufei, with more dignity, picked up his thick shirt and jacket and slipped them on. "Did that idiot at the commissary say when they'll be getting the pieces to fix our furnace?"

"Tomorrow."

"Strange, that's what he said yesterday, and the day before."

"Yeah, I noticed that too. If he doesn't come up with them soon, I'll break up that motor I have in the yard and wing it with the spare pieces."

"Thus violating every safety regulation in existence. Do you really want to use a furnace fixed with spit and string to heat an entire building?"

"Do you want to freeze? It could take months for the commissary to get a hold of the parts. At least I have someone to warm my bed at night," Duo added with a gloriously dirty leer, "but the other poor buggers in this building are single."

Wufei's comment about the lack of efficiency of Freeport's distribution system died in a startled cough.

That'd been the pattern of the last few days. The two of them hunted their prey through the back alleys of Freeport and, whatever else had gone down between them, on that they were a unit. Two warriors, one intent, and only one enemy. Then they'd get home to eat, sleep, rest, take stock and fight like dogs out in the yard under the guise of training sessions.

Duo's anger behind the violence was real, and Wufei understood it. He'd endangered Duo's position in Freeport, lied to him and betrayed his trust. Wufei would accept more than a few bruises to redress that wrong. What was confusing was the way Duo would switch that anger off and revert to being a friend, and more, in the blink of an eye. Wufei's emotions were strong, directed, controlled. When he
wanted to punch someone's lights out, he didn't feel the urge to snuggle up with them too. Living
with someone who felt absolutely fine with both emotions concurrently...was 'doing his head in', to
adopt a phrase from the nuisance in question.

It was worse since the damnable heater had broken. For the last two mornings, Wufei had woken up
with Duo's cold hands and feet pressed against whatever part of Wufei's body was warmest and most
accessible. He'd complained of course, and received a smug sleepy grin in return that was as uplifting
as the dawn Wufei hadn't seen since he'd arrived in this anarchist colony. Then a whole new day
would start in which Duo alternatively fought at his side, watched Wufei's back, tried to nail him to
the junkyard floor, curled up in bed for a quick kiss and grope...

"Here. Enjoy." Duo set a deep plate in front of him and flourished a fork with the hand he'd been
trying to bury in Wufei's midriff about ten minutes ago. Wufei took the utensil with a small nod
instead of grabbing Duo by the braid and shaking some kind of consistency out of him. Duo was
Duo, as unchangeable in his changeable ways as Wufei was in his single-minded ones, and he was
still Wufei's ally, friend and lover despite the initial breach of trust. There was no yardstick that could
measure this forgiveness. Wufei really had no luxury to complain about mercurial behavior. Not out
loud, at least.

They both turned to their plates and poked the food for a few seconds in silence.

"I think it's got potatoes in it," Wufei hazarded, turning over a lump.

"Everything Babka makes has got potatoes in it. That or beets."

"At least it's healthy," Wufei said philosophically, spearing the lump and bringing it to his mouth.

"It hasn't killed us yet. She's never tried to feed me this much before. It's only since you got here.
Have you been giving her hungry puppy dog looks each time you visit with her?"

Wufei didn't answer, just chewed thoughtfully.

"It's not too bad, actually," he finally judged.

Duo took a cautious nibble and shrugged. "I've tasted worst. Too salty, but that's standard for her.
Maybe she's finally learning how to cook."

"I doubt that's the problem." Wufei blew on a piece of meat (probably a piece of meat) to cool it.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't think it's because she doesn't know how to cook. She and her husband lived on a mining and
refining satellite for nearly two decades. Rare earths: neodymium, that sort of stuff. They were under
Alliance contracts, and we all know what the Earthers thought about safety conditions in space
versus productivity. The dust from processing those minerals can cause lung cancer, but it can also
damage the nervous system, particularly the olfactory senses."

Wufei finished another bite and took a drink of water to wash it down. He glanced up to find Duo
looking at him thoughtfully, a fork stuck motionless in the stew.

"You see, if her sense of taste has deteriorated, she-"

"Yeah, I got it, I got it. That'd explain a lot." Duo was still looking at him in an odd, weighing way.
"Did she tell you that?"
"I doubt she's aware of it; she wouldn't cook if she was."

"I meant, about the mining colony, and the accident, and her husband and kids and all that?"

"Yes."

"She doesn't talk about that a lot, normally."

"Oh."

Wufei took a few more bites, uncomfortable under Duo's scrutiny.

Thinking about Babka distracted him. She weighed heavily on Wufei's mind, and not only because her cuisine wasn't always that digestible. Wufei was afraid that the respectable elder would be the first victim if he and Duo were attacked.

They were taking as many precautions as they could. That was why the heater was broken; the piece of junk had been on its last legs already, but it had expired when Wufei and Duo had taken it apart to install an anti-tamper device. They'd done the same to the electrical installation and fire alarm response system. If the Breakers decided to attack them on the sly, they could arrange an 'accident' that might engulf the entire building to cover their tracks. It wouldn't be an easy thing to do in Freeport where eyes were always watching, but Duo maintained that if the Breakers could invade Recyc, then they were undoubtedly magicians.

But what if their foe took a much more direct approach?

Duo had dropped his fork to make 'brrr' noises and rub his arms. "Too fuckin' cold to eat," he complained. "Too fuckin' cold, period."

"Duo, you have to find a way of convincing Babka to go stay at her friend's house in Barbieri." Gilla was away most of the day working at the local child-care centre, and all the other inhabitants were young and agile enough to run away from a firefight.

"Babka? Babka was born and raised in Ukraine. This is mild spring weather by her standards. It's our lily-white spacer asses I'm worried about."

"I meant, in regards to the fact that armed gunmen could strafe this building at any time," Wufei ground out. "As for myself, I can stand the cold perfectly well."

"Yeah, I guess your ass isn't that lily-white. More of a light caramel color," Duo said with a dreamy smile. "Hah, that's warmed me up."

Wufei glared at the smarmy bastard as Duo reached for his plate again.

"I wouldn't worry about gunmen, mate; not on Freeport." The pest was back to serious and businesslike again as if a switch had been flicked. The aggravated Preventer couldn't ignore the possibility that all this was just one more way Duo had found to tease him and even the score. "I don't think they'd try anything open even with normal weapons. They're trying to keep a low profile, remember?"

"Which part of 'low profile' does invading Recyc correspond to?"

"The part that'll eventually put them in a rendering vat," Duo answered with a malicious grin that was rather ruined by the fact he'd half-buried his head in the collar of his sweater and was shivering. They shouldn't have sweated that much out in the yard, not while the heater was on the blink. But
they were both men of action, and the wait was grating. The nominal yet not-entirely-inaccurate excuse for their training bouts was to release tension and keep their fighting edge.

"They have to act soon," said Duo, gaze turned inward as he loaded his fork. "We have the names of some of the dead guys. We know where they lived, we know who their friends were. We found out that some of these guys have been making quite a lot of off-colony trips in pirate and smuggler ships this last year, nobody knows where to, while a couple of them decided to pick up arms dealing as a hobby a few months back. If this is Ravachol we're dealing with, he's not gonna let us get any further. He's not the 'wait and see' kinda guy. Hell, we're starting to know almost as much as Herb did, and they killed him for it. We're a major pain in their collective asses and they've already ignored us for too long."

Why was Herb killed...? Wufei dragged his fork through the sauce. The Breakers' secrecy was apparently vital to them, yet they'd broken cover to silence Herb. Why? Did Herb know something even more dangerous than their existence? Maybe the identity of the boss...? But Wufei and Duo knew that too. Considering Ravachol's courteous visit the other day, it was obvious that-

"Yeah, by all rights, we should be dead already," Duo announced with some satisfaction before taking a huge bite.

"Something to look forward to then," Wufei muttered. "I just wish we knew what it was they were doing on those trips outside the colony."

"Hopefully Tro can cover that side for us," Duo mumbled around another big mouthful.

"Yes..."

It had been a possibility from the start that these Breakers were simply some kind of local mafia. With the paranoia and self-regulation of the citizens of Freeport, organized crime directed against their own colony would not be tolerated (as opposed to organized crime directed against the rest of the Space Sphere, which was pretty much considered fair game). Carver and Ferret might be mere employees who spent their vacation outside the colony killing and causing riots for profit. But Wufei suspected it was much more than that. To see just how far the web spread, Wufei had sent the profiles and names of the dead men and whatever associates he and Duo could find to Trowa. Heero could help him fish around the Preventer files and see if these people and their crimes came together in a coherent picture outside of Freeport.

Wufei had a fairly good idea of what they would find. In his mind's eye, he could see a shadowy organization sending colonist ex-rebels - trained and skilled veterans with a bone to pick when it came to Earther rule - out from Freeport, secretly, into the colonies...and the colonies erupting into violence, like the outbreaks of a virus.

Ferret had been one of the igniters of the X953 riots. Wufei and his colleagues had thought until recently that he was just some hot-headed agitator who'd taken advantage of an opportunity to cause trouble. But the volatile situation on that colony had started when Carver had assassinated a local cell leader. As far as the Preventers were concerned, these two facts were unfortunate in their cumulative effects, but ultimately unrelated. Now Wufei had the proof that Carver and Ferret were linked. Had Carver's hits really been a contract killing? What else had the Breakers been doing out there? Just how much of this was going according to some overall plan?

These Breakers could be merely gun-runners, fanning the flames of violence to fatten their profit line. Or they could be mercenaries, working for somebody else's agenda. Or...

Wufei's instincts, honed by years of war and detective work, were screaming at him, but he
disciplined himself to wait as patiently as he could for some actual hard evidence before rushing off half-cocked. He and Duo had dropped by Scythe every day, waiting for Trowa's answer, but so far they'd only gotten one on the very first day. The encrypted note was terse and to the point. 'Knew you couldn't keep out of trouble. Glad you're both still alive. This new line of investigation takes top priority. Analyzing your data, will send results ASAP.'

Wufei decided that this was official sanction to do his worse to the Breakers. Carver wasn't his only goal here now. He remembered Herb and Lesley and Agostina sobbing behind her door. No, it wasn't just about Carver anymore, the other Breakers were also going to pay...

"Wake up and eat, Chang. We got a lot to do this afternoon," Duo told him prosaically, chewing down more quickly than he usually did. Wufei nodded glumly. A fellow rat-catcher was keeping a discreet eye on a suspect named Tor Kendle. He was a citizen of Kropotkin who was a known friend of three of the men rendered down to dust, ash and water in Recyc. It was likely this was the same Tor who had commanded the strike force in Recyc. But Duo couldn't ask his friends to take too many risks. Wufei and Duo would have to do most of the following and observing.

"What really depresses me is that once we finish these leftovers-" Duo paused to cough, swallow and take a swig of water. "After we finish this mystery-meat dish, we're left with commissary food. And we won't have the time to-"

Footsteps. Duo paused, food still in his mouth. Wufei, glass in hand, looked suspiciously on the door.

The knock that followed was brisk and probably not the herald of a surprise attack.

"Yeah?" Duo called out, standing up cautiously and moving away from the workbench in complete silence after that single acknowledgment. Wufei imitated him; it was an old and healthy habit. Anybody bursting through the door with a gun - or a crossbow, Freeport-style - would not know where they were in the room.

"Maxwell? You there?"

"That you, Ellie?"

"Yeah. I just got a note: you're needed in Lao Tzu. Elder Braun wants to see you. It's amber."

Duo grabbed his coat and Wufei picked up his sword. The last time Braun had summoned them on an urgent matter, they'd ended up with a dead body. What was it going to be this time?

The only way Wufei would have guessed that this building was the Elders' Compound was the number of Red Bands running around in the streets leading to it. It was a square building that looked a lot like the bar where Duo and Wufei had met Mako. Some murals on one of the concrete walls might have been an attempt to distinguish it from the other buildings in Lao Tzu sector, but since they looked like something an enthusiastic fourth-grader would paint, the effect didn't exactly bring the grey building any dignity or reverence.

Wufei's scholarly curiosity about Freeport was still alive and busy sorting the multitude of facts he'd gathered these past months. Most of his concentration remained with the case - and if he were honest
with himself, he'd have to admit that a lot of his spare mental energy had gone from figuring out Freeport to figuring out one Duo Maxwell, Citizen. But he still gathered information when he could, and he took this opportunity to observe the nerve centre of Freeport with interest.

The entire first floor was a meeting hall, with plastic chairs clustered around a podium. The next few floors were office cubicles, many of which bore the decorations of grandchildren to individualize them. The place was surprisingly empty. Wufei only spotted a couple of elderly women talking to four Red Bands, and another man old enough to be Master Li's father, typing at a computer. The other offices and cubicles he passed were empty. The Elders spent most of their time in their sectors, living their lives and making sure the other citizens were okay.

Wufei wasn't very surprised. Freeport didn't have a centralized authority, only a few hundred pair of watchful eyes. It was no longer surprising, but it bothered Wufei in a very fundamental way. Sure, individual sectors were fairly tight; people knew each other, watched each other. But he remembered how Duo had gotten lunch from that Korean lady on their first day here. She'd judged him to be honest with a glance, and dished out the soup without payment or assurances of return. What if someone went from sector to sector bumming food and goods from people, and never giving anything back to the community? Without some kind of centralized control, you could abuse the system in hundreds of ways.

"We probably have a number of freeloaders," had been Duo's answer when Wufei challenged him about it. "But it's gotta be a lonely life, don't you think?"

It seemed Freeport preferred the abuse of a few desperate individuals to the possible abuse of some central authority. This bugged Wufei, not on a political plane - okay, maybe a little bit on a political plane, but mainly it was a question of fairness. There was no currency, no credits, nothing to guarantee that people who did contribute were adequately compensated for their efforts. Duo imported a lot of crucial equipment into Freeport and spent hours fixing same when things broke down, yet it took days, maybe even weeks, for Freeport to cough up a regulator for the furnace. Where was the justice in that?

"Stop glowering, you're gonna frighten the natives," Duo whispered at him.

Wufei transferred his non-specific scowl to a specific braided target. This system worked because people like Duo put up with it and supported it. Wufei wasn't sure he could...

They followed Ellie, one of the Makhno Red Bands, up three flights of stairs. Braun was waiting for them on the topmost floor. Up here, all the doors were closed, and were solid and secured compared to the open offices below. This area must contain sensitive equipment.

Braun dismissed the Red Band with a curt nod. He didn't move or even look up until her steps were no longer audible in the stairwell.

"This had better not happen again," he said with a look of cold fury directed at Wufei. He turned to open the door behind him before Duo could ask any questions. They trailed after the old man as he stomped into the room towards a desk against the wall. There was a high quality communicator there, the kind that could take colony-to-colony transmissions on a narrow band and carry both sound and image. Braun hit a button with a short, sharp jab. The screen lit up and the comm line crackled.

"He's here," the Elder snapped.

"Ah, thank you, Mr Braun."
Wufei felt his skin go cold. Duo's breath whistled through his teeth. That had been Trowa's voice, crackling over the speaker.

"May I talk with my man in private?" Trowa asked politely.

"No," Braun answered and walked off a few paces, motioning Wufei to take his place.

Something's happened to Heero, was Wufei's first and worst thought. Heero could take some pretty big risks with his life, and without Wufei around to watch his back-...

"Barton, what is it?"

Trowa's expectant look had frozen into something unreadable when Wufei had sat down in front of the communicator. He was silent for a few seconds, green eyes a trifle wide, then he smiled faintly.

"This is Chang Wufei I'm talking to, right?"

"Huh? Yes, it's-" Wufei interrupted himself with a snarl halfway between anger and mortification, suddenly and acutely aware that his hair was loose, wild and rough from Freeport's hard water, and that his clothes were those of a less-reputable thug. With his luck, he probably had a streak of grease on his face after fighting with Duo in the junkyard. Trowa, by contrast, looked every inch the competent Preventer in his crisp uniform, his unruly hair held back by his Specials' beret.

Behind Wufei, Duo was chuckling, obviously relieved by Trowa's levity, and sharing the joke, the bastard. Elder Braun wasn't laughing, he radiated disapproval behind them, and no wonder if a Preventer had asked him to fetch the agent undercover on Braun's colony.

"Did you have a valid reason for calling me here, Barton? If so, I'm listening."

Trowa's small smile widened, but it was now a practiced movement of the mouth that Wufei knew well. It triggered several alarm bells.

"It's good news for you, actually. The Freeport op is finished. You can come home."
"God save the Queen
She ain't no human being.
There is no future
In England's dreaming

Don't be told what you want
Don't be told what you need.
There's no future
There's no future
There's no future for you"
---The Sex Pistols, 'God Save the Queen'

You can come home...? The words ran around in Wufei's head, not making any sense. What home? Was this some kind of code?

Behind him, Duo had stopped laughing.

"What?"

"I'm pulling you off this op, Wufei. You did a good job integrating into the colony; it looks promising for future efforts here, but for now-"

Braun snorted harshly. Trowa's eyes flickered towards the Elder. Wufei could see Trowa carefully note the man's reaction, though his face never lost its starchy keen-young-officer expression.

"I want you back here," Trowa continued, perfectly composed. "We did our best, but the case with the Governor has gotten out of hand. We need you for the enquiry. Don't worry too much. I don't foresee any serious problems. Relena's promised to intervene directly on your behalf if need be."

"What?" Wufei repeated numbly. This just wasn't making sense. The L2 Governor could never pull a special agent off an undercover op...

"I'm hoping that if we can get you, the Governor and his lawyers together, with Une and Relena backing you, then an apology on your part will be enough. A face-to-face apology, of course. It's the quickest way for the whole thing to blow over."

"What the hell are you going on about?!" Wufei finally burst out. Behind his bewilderment, prickles of foreboding were creeping up his back and shoulders.

Trowa looked down his nose at the interruption. He picked up some papers in front of him and tapped them against his desk a few times, like a judge rapping a gavel to bring an unruly bench to order. A small, pompous gesture completely at odds with a man who never wasted a move or showed an emotion that didn't serve a purpose...The prickles became claws which sank into Wufei's neck and chest. That was their personal code. Three taps: Trowa's side was being monitored and Wufei was to watch what he said.

"Chang, both Une and myself worked hard to get the Governor to this stage. He wanted your head.
He might still get it if you don't get back here promptly. We have a frigate, the Confucius, near the embargo line. If your informant can drop you off there in the next two hours, we can:"

"What about my investigation here?"

"There's been an internal review about that. 'Codename Carver' has been reassigned to Criminal Class B. It was a mistake to bump him up to A to start with. The regular L2 Preventers will deal with him now."

Wufei thought of Joshua and Herb, of Marta's bleak look, of Lesley's demand for justice.

"What about the rest?" he ground out.

"The rest? Oh, that report you sent a few days ago? Some gang. There's no real indication that they're a threat. Well, except to Freeport, but that's to be expected of the place."

There was a nasty little sound from Braun. Duo was still totally silent.

Trowa's voice seemed to be fading in and out, yet Wufei could hear every word.

"As for that report of yours...Internal Affairs reviewed that as well, and dismissed it from Records. I think they did you a favor. Linking a few ragtag pirates and thugs together and coming up with some shadowy dissident movement operating out of Freeport? To be honest, it makes you sound a bit paranoid. I know you've been working hard-"

"So this is not going to be followed up."

"No, we don't have the manpower. We'll catch them when they attack some ship or peddle drugs or whatever they're up to."

That's not what they're up to! We both know that! The words boiled behind Wufei's facade, eating away at his control. He couldn't prove it, but he would bet his life that the Breakers were participating - maybe even causing - some of the riots and problems in the colonies. Carver, and Ferret, those men in Recyc, and now this. Now this! Paranoid, huh? A neat way of getting rid of the evidence from one lone Preventer who'd put his nose into a very nasty business. And wasn't this intervention very timely and convenient for Wufei's quarry?

Looked like guns and assassination contracts were not the only thing the Breakers were buying and selling on the outside. Looked like they'd purchased some influence in Preventer upper echelon as well.

"Wufei?"

"What?" He sounded dazed to his own ears.

"I said, can you be at the blockade in two hours? The Confucius can't wait around too long. We've been having some problems on L3. More riots. I need you back here, cleared of the Governor's charges and ready to resume your regular duties sometime yesterday. I'm running your partner ragged as it is. So?"

So?

"I... I can..."

So he'd go back and apologize to the Governor, burning a few more shreds of his pride, but who was
counting now? Of course Une and Trowa would in no way ignore Wufei's report on what was happening in Freeport; that would be suicidal. The problem would be dealt with, probably through a judicious strengthening of the blockade. A bit more attention would be paid to the comings and goings from the colony. Whoever had pressured Une to drop this case would be dealt with too. Oh, not openly of course. It would be very discreet; he or she was probably someone important and undoubtedly rich. They'd be...managed. Their influence reduced. A subtle warning given. Everything would be handled delicately, and there would be no fuss to disturb the six o'clock news. As far as everyone in TV-land was concerned, the Peace was whole and prospering. They didn't need to know about Carver, who would probably never be caught now. They didn't need to know about the bodies and the grief and the lies.

"Agent Chang?"

Wufei muttered something even he couldn't understand, slammed back the chair and headed towards the door.

"Wufei?! Wait."

Duo's exclamation was cut off by a sharp command from the com unit. "Maxwell, I need to talk to you."

Wufei didn't hang around to see what means of pressure Trowa would use on Duo to keep the smuggler from kicking up a fuss about all this. That would be more difficult than labeling Wufei paranoid and dragging him back by the scruff of the neck. Duo was a free agent, after all. But a threat to impound Scythe and look more closely into what the ship occasionally carried...that should do the trick. As for Braun, the Elder knew little, and was stalemated by the fact that he'd allowed Wufei into Freeport in the first place. It was all very neat. The handling had already started.

An old man practically threw himself out of the way, a heap of papers scattering around him when he caught the look on Wufei's face as the latter charged past him. Wufei noted the fact in the back of his mind where he kept a watch out for enemies, but otherwise didn't slow down.

His feet thundered down the steps. Someone asked him a question in a surprised voice as he passed. He didn't turn around. The only thing he could really hear over the beat of his boots on metal was the memory of a conciliating voice saying, "Wufei, you don't understand."

No, I don't, Relena. I never will. I can't.

He veered towards the emergency exit out of the building, slammed the bar down and shoved the door open hard.

Of course, that was not how he'd answered during that argument with Relena over two years ago. He remembered his words as if he'd just shouted them at her.

"What is there to understand?! We can bring them in! We have enough proof! Let me have them for twenty-four hours and-"

He'd slammed his fist on her desk again to punctuate the word 'proof'. She'd looked rather thankful to have the thick piece of furniture between them. She'd been making appeasing gestures, and her eyes had flickered beseechingly towards Heero who was ten feet away and looked like he could be in the next galaxy for all he cared about this conversation. He was not taking sides.

"Wufei-" Ooooh, that gentle stress on his name, as if she was trying to reason with a temperamental child. "We're talking about the chairman and two members of the senate-"
"They're traitors!"

"They're important." Her eyes had darted towards Heero again. She was obviously on the verge of giving up talking sense to Wufei herself. "They're known and respectable figures. We can't arrest them, it would cause a panic. Armed forces marching into a government building bring back too many bad memories. The situation in the Disaster Zones is too unstable for that. They'll be dealt with. We will discreetly remove-"

"You'll force them to retire with full pensions and no punishment for their crimes, you mean." He wasn't surprised, he'd known all this before he'd even shown up at the palace. Her explanations were unnecessary; he'd been doing the Preventer's dirty work for over a year at that point, he knew how it worked. But this time he wanted something more than a hint to go 'clean up some trouble' and a few days of suspension afterwards. Heero probably knew what Wufei wanted too, which was why his partner was not interfering. "So to stop the armed forces they're gathering, you want me to walk in - without official orders, to avoid any political repercussions if I'm caught - into a well guarded compound - look at me when I'm speaking to you, woman!"

Relena's eyes had flinched away from the still-silent Heero and back to Wufei.

"You want me to do something that violates the oath I took as a Preventer, go in without a warrant, get the information that links them to this upcoming coup d'état in a manner that won't stand up in court and then stoop to their level by using it to blackmail them out of power. That's supposing I don't get myself killed in the attempt which, without backup, is pretty damn likely. All because you don't want to arrest three corrupt-"

"Wufei, if you don't want to do it-"

"Oh, I'll do it," he said. The sudden decrease in volume had worried her more than the shouting, her eyes had widened further and she looked even younger, absurdly young for so much power..."But if I'm going to go get myself corrupted or killed for your politics, Madam President, then I want you to look me in the eyes and order me to do it."

So Relena had ordered him to do it.

She hadn't even glanced at Heero. In her steady gaze Wufei had seen his death sentence, the need for it, her guilt and her resolve to bear the responsibility fully. He'd been the one to look away first.

It had been a bitter epiphany, the last shreds of his warrior ideals torn away in the face of reality. But he'd had to accept it. Relena knew what she wanted, knew what needed to be done, and she knew the cost. She was willing to pay it. She might lose her own soul on the way to Peace, but she accepted that sacrifice too. She'd also had to give up some of her ideals in exchange for a future without war, a future where people could finally live without compromise. A future Wufei believed in too. He just had to learn to accept compromises in order to help build it.

The streets of Freeport rushed past him, he was almost running. He remembered racing with Duo, bright, murderous and free...

He hadn't seen Relena since then. The fact he'd had to knock out her bodyguard when he'd started yelling at her was only part of the reason.

Relena's face when she'd given him the order...Duo's look of fury when he'd shouted at Wufei, fists knotted in his shirt...

You let them use you! It's killing you inside and you don't even care!
He was running now, full out, turning and twisting blindly through the alleys like a rat in a maze. His instincts, used to Freeport now, kept him away from the busier streets, but otherwise let him try to escape the inevitable without interference.

Heero, Trowa, Quatre, Sally, Une... their sympathetic looks flashed before his eyes, more real than the curious glances of the occasional passersby. His other Preventer colleagues, expressions guarded or stiff with reproof...

An open maintenance hatch let him into the inner workings of Freeport. He caught his shoulder against a protruding pipe, careened against the wall, kept on running, broke out of the confining space and into the metal cage of another sector.

Relena's New Year speech of AC200, 'Peace is our only truth now'. They'd made the prisoners listen to it while he was in the stockade.

His boots kicked debris as he staggered up a slight incline. His breathing was harsh and labored, more than his exertions could explain, as if the colony's oxygen mix had dropped, leaving him drowning in sterile air.

He ran out of room to run so suddenly it made him stagger. The alleys and labyrinthine streets had deserted him. He turned on himself like an animal at bay. Dust rose to his knees. He was in a dump where the non-recyclable trash accumulated while waiting for removal from the colony. Metal twisted around him with no clearly defined paths ahead.

- Trowa had ordered him back - he was going to leave Duo alone here - Carver was never going to pay -

"YAAAAAAAA!"

Wufei leaned over abruptly, hands on his knees, as if the furious, incoherent scream had ripped out whatever had kept him standing straight.

The echoes bounced and shattered amongst the metal of the scraps and the nearby buildings. Wufei shivered and hunched further in on himself, horrified as his reason slowly returned. He waited, flinching, for someone to start shouting at him.

Behind him, someone opened a window in a building abutting the junkyard. Words drifted over the wreckage. "You okay?"

Wufei weakly lifted a hand and waved without turning around. He doubted that would suffice though.

A clanging noise made him glance up swiftly. A boy appeared between the heaps of junk ahead of him, apparently looking for the source of the shouting; he had an intense look of curiosity on his face, as if he expected to find something exciting going on. He was dragging a two-foot metal spike with him, clanging it against the pieces of junk he passed.

Wufei stared at the child. The child stared at him. The boy was about eight years old, skinny and dirty as hell, but he didn't look derelict.

The kid examined him solemnly, disappointed for a moment that Wufei was the rather anticlimactic source of all that noise. Then he grinned, revealing small sharp teeth set in a strange pattern, some spacer mutation. His skin was pale beneath the dirt, a contrast to his messy black hair; his dark eyes were slanted, making his smirk look all the more impish.
Throwing up his free hand, the urchin let out a series of wild whoops. The peals of his high voice followed Wufei's previous shout out of the twisted maze of junk, falling short of haunting the rest of the sector. The boy laughed in delight, listening to the echoes.

Wufei found himself laughing as well. His deeper chuckles bounced around the small nest of wire, plastic and sheet metal around them, and the kid laughed right back at him. Behind them, the window closed without any further comment from the owner.

An adult voice called out beyond the junk pile. The boy lifted his head, gave Wufei a cheerful wave and rushed off. He stopped after a few feet to jab at the air with the spike, fighting invisible enemies who had sprung up to obstruct the way home. Having defeated them, he disappeared into the maze of junk.

Wufei watched him go, then he shook himself. Time to take stock. He had a lot to think about.

For starters, where the hell was he...?

--------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Wufei tapped the code into the back yard door's keypad. He could hear movement on the other side, Duo must have gone straight back home to wait for him. Fortunately Wufei had been able to make his way discreetly back to the apartment without meeting anybody inclined to ask him pointed questions regarding his absence of a Handler. His months of running around Freeport's under city and secret streets with Duo had paid off.

Duo was in the yard, moodily throwing a basketball through the hoop with a bit more force than warranted.

"Oh, there you are," he said as Wufei closed the door and walked towards him. "I'd tell you just how stupid that was, running off like that, but we only got thirty minutes to get you to Scythe. I put your stuff in the duffel-

"Did you now?" Wufei grabbed the ball from Duo's hands and tossed it at the hoop. It missed, smacking against the metal wall about two feet away from the net. "Make sure you fold my clothes properly when you put them back on the shelf, then. I hate it when my stuff gets wrinkled."

"Uh?"

Wufei caught the ball on the rebound, and threw it again. Missed again. His arms felt like they were trying to bend steel rather than hoop a ball. "I'm not going back."

"Say what? But Trowa said-"

The ball slammed straight into the wall so hard the whole yard rang like a drum.

"Barton can go fuck himself! They all can!"

Wufei caught the ball by reflex and sent it smashing against the wall again.

"I'm going after Carver and the Breakers, and if I can't do it legally then-" the ball hammered the metal - "then I'll do it any bloody way I can but Carver is going down!"
"Er-" Duo took a step back as the ball came rocketing towards him. Wufei had to stretch to pluck it out of the air, but the movement barely registered. He spun on Duo.

"I know that's vigilantism! I know it's not the law! But who cares?! You can buy the law for a couple of bucks and a blowjob these days!"

The ball went crashing back into the wall again. It hit a seam and bounced back oddly, but Wufei managed to catch it.

"Wufei, I didn't say-"

Slam!

"And if Barton wants to get me on a ship, then he better bring a bloody army with him because-"

Slam!

Duo was suddenly in front of him, snatching the ball out of the air on the rebound with one hand. The other hand thumped Wufei on the shoulder. Wufei was so keyed up he fell back into a defense form on instinct.

Duo gave him a fine glare. "Yeah, I got the picture already. I'm not with the suit monkeys, remember?"

"...Sorry, I just... I..." Wufei rubbed his face until his skin ached. A scream was ringing in his ears, or maybe it was a wild whoop of joy...

"Yeah, I know." Duo's hand was on his shoulder again, but this time it was a strong, comforting pressure. "You sure about this though? Barton...he looked serious. He mentioned the charges the Governor wants to level at you. It's not just the fact that you cuffed that moron's ass in the basement, it's about the way you neutralized the opposition afterwards without his consent or proper orders from your higher-ups. I don't know if Trowa can help you if that gets too far. You could go down hard."

Wufei snorted and looked away.

"Sounded like he's expecting you to dig your heels in," Duo continued. "Told me to drag you to Scythe if I needed to. But clown-boy can swivel on that. Still, sounds serious, buddy. He seems to think you're coming apart at the seams. At least that's what he said to the cameras; I know Barton's not that dumb. But he's going to have to put you out to farm for a long time if you give him any shit; the kind where holiday means house arrest by the sounds of it. He also said 'paranoid' again." The ball thumped through the hoop, the noise nearly burying Duo's disgusted snort.

Wufei turned around slowly and stared at Duo's shoulders.

"Holiday?"

"Yeah. Better than the stockade, I guess, but-"

"What did he say exactly?"

Duo looked over his shoulder, surprised at Wufei's degree of interest.

"Nothing much. Said that I should walk you to my ship and drop you off at the embargo line. I wasn't to take no for an answer." Duo absently twirled the ball on his fingertip, his lips twisted into a
rich sneer. "Mentioned the Gov's charges. Said all that pressure was probably getting to you, 'cause you were showing signs of 'mental fatigue', and that he was going to suggest you take a long holiday to get over it, use some of the leave you've accrued over the years. He said something about a friend in Monaco too."

Wufei ignored the fleeting look from Duo, the near-question in that last sentence. He was thinking.

"What is it?" Duo asked him quietly.

"A long holiday is code. We never take more than a few days break, the three of us," Wufei explained absently. "When we take a 'long holiday', that means we're going under the radar."

The ball toppled from Duo's finger, but he snagged it out of the air again before it hit the floor.

"You're saying...Trowa's suggested, without really doing so, that you take a...working holiday?" he asked slowly, a deadly grin forming on his lips.

"Tell me, Maxwell, how is Freeport this time of year? Nice place for a tourist like me?"

"Oh sure. Lots of activities. Sports, if you haven't killed my ball. Good- well, healthy food, and the natives are friendly."

"Really? I'll just have to hunt around until I find some unfriendly ones then. According to my shrink, I have a lot of aggression to work out."

"I'll help," Duo announced generously, looping an arm around Wufei's shoulders.

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Duo was reading the message out loud as he typed it. "-buy... the law for a...couple of bucks and a-"

"Maxwell!"

"Hey, that's what you said! You said you could buy the law for- ouch, hey, that's police brutality."

"I'll write it."

"No no, I'm nearly done. I just need to add the bit where you told Barton and the rest of the fascist brigade to go fuck themselves."

Wufei manhandled Duo out of Scythe's copilot seat and sat down himself. He deleted the disrespectful drivel Duo had written and started typing.

"I preferred my version," Duo said, looking over his shoulder. He was vibrating with energy and his sense of chaotic humor had gone into overdrive. Wufei didn't mind. His own head felt like it was buzzing. He didn't mind the arms that slipped around his chest as Duo leaned against his back, either.

The message was curt. 'Lieutenant Barton. Agreed, the mission is now cancelled. As we discussed before this operation, I wish to request paid leave from my accrued in-lieu time. You have the form on your desk. Auth. Code: 45292. Agent Chang.'

"He has the form on his desk?" Duo asked, his words tickling the side of Wufei's face.
"He always has; a precaution Heero and I take whenever we leave on any mission that might spin out of control. He just needs to fill in the dates and say we both agreed to it ahead of time. Duo, are you sure about this?"

"Huh?" Duo moved away and tilted his head to meet Wufei's gaze. "Whadya mean? You're the one who's in deep shit here."

"Yes, but if there's really bad fallout- did Trowa threaten you? Say anything during that transmission to pressure you off the case?"

"Nah, I think whoever was watching over Tro's shoulder thought I was just some stoolie. Clown-boy gave me a lot of orders about you, and then he promised he'd dump partial payment into my secret account as compensation for my time." A finger started slowly tracing the pattern of Wufei's chest muscles.

Wufei refused to lose his concentration. "Maxwell," he said sharply, "he was trying to keep you out of this, and I approve of that. But if I end up a smoking hole in the ground, you could still be in the blast radius. I'm working without a net here. Trowa will try to help us if I go down, but if he has to he'll sacrifice me, and potentially you as well, without hesitation to-"

The fingers reprovingly pinched the skin over his ribs. "I piloted one of the great beasts too, Chang. I hit the button, I know how it goes. Just send the fucking message already so we can go home. We'll start your holiday with a bit of mattress-flavored R&R, then we can go find some unfriendly natives."

The last was said with a cheerful leer. The eyes were those of Shinigami. The Breakers were as good as dead. Wufei buried his twinges of guilt; it was Duo's decision, and the ex-pilot of Deathscythe would know and accept every consequence.

"Very well. How do I send this?"

"Here, hit this to encrypt, and then-... Oy."

"What?"

Duo suddenly detached himself from Wufei, came around to the ship's console and started entering commands with a frown of concentration on his face. Wufei waited tensely, knowing Duo would tell him what was so serious as soon as he could.

The smuggler blinked as a command window popped up and a progress bar started to creep very slowly across the screen.

"We already had mail on the encrypted channel from the blockade."

"What does it say?"

"Well...nothing. It's just a huge chunk of data- Jesus, Mary and Joseph, seventy Gs, high compression and double encrypted, what the fuck-"

Wufei let out the breath he'd been holding. Very well, the fortunes were cast.

"What is it?" Duo prompted, correctly interpreting Wufei's expression.

"Trowa's last message. I imagine it's a huge chunk of raw data from the Preventer's database. All the information - and more - that Heero managed to comb out in the past few days, plus anything else"
that could be remotely useful thrown in. All criminal files and cases involving colony riots, underground arms ops, drug deals."

"Lieutenant Barton's way of telling us, 'good luck, you're on your own'." Duo supplied.

"Yes."

Duo stared at the progress bar and grinned savagely.

"Good, better this way. Come on, Chang. This will take awhile to download, and we need to dump it onto my laptop which I don't have with me. Let's go and come back in a couple hours. It'll be safe in Scythe's computer in the meantime; Heero vetted my baby's security thoroughly."

Wufei rose from the seat, and found himself pinned against the console by a fierce kiss.

Just as suddenly he was left gasping and staring at Duo's back as the latter headed towards the airlock with the assured prowl of the hunter with the scent of blood on the air.

Wufei caught his breath and glanced back at the progress bar, its creeping red line slowly slicing away the tethers that kept him linked to the Outside. He turned away without regret and followed Duo out of the airlock.
Chapter 28

"I am the man for which no god waits
But for which the whole world yearns
And I'm marked by darkness and by blood
And by a thousand powder burns"

---Nick Cave, 'O'Malley's bar'

Wufei laboriously scrolled down the document, trying to fit the appropriate pieces of interconnecting information he wanted to study onto the laptop's small screen; it'd be easier if he had a wall projector. Maybe he and Duo could build one from the scraps in the yard outside.

After several weeks of painstaking work, tailing and investigations, they were putting together more and more of the strands that composed the Breaker's web. It was fiendishly complicated. Forget the wall projector; what Wufei needed was a holographic matrix to show the multilayered threat that was slowly coming to light.

Two hours, ten minutes- no, Wufei was not going to worry about that.

He clicked a few keys moodily. Pages scrolled past.

Wufei and Duo had been following Tor Kendle, their one confirmed Breaker, the man who'd been the lieutenant of the forces that had attacked them in Recyc. They'd tailed him for two weeks, recording every person he talked to, every one of his business deals, everything he did.

Wufei had studiously noted all that information, and only later had he realized that he'd put it all down in the format of a Preventer report; a crime sheet nobody would ever be getting. Despite this realization, he still added any new detail to the ongoing data, telling himself it was a handy format in which to organize information. At the back of his mind, though, he felt like the cop version of Pavlov's dogs, his brain wired to follow the routines of a justice system that no longer recognized him.

The Preventer database that Heero and Trowa had downloaded to the hotbed of crime that was Freeport, probably breaking dozens of rules and regulations to do so, was a goldmine of information. A very apt analogy, since it contained a few nuggets of precious evidence hidden within the dross of a thousand unrelated facts. The Breakers had raised paranoia and secrecy into a higher art form. They were buried deep in the most inaccessible colony there was, like a deeply hidden cancer that hadn't started killing its host yet. They rarely acted directly on the Outside, either. They made use of hired agents, or planted assassins like Carver to kill people, but only if they could make it look like some other agency was responsible. But after hundreds of incident reports, Wufei was starting to get a feel for the way the Breakers worked. He could tell with some degree of confidence when an incident was just normal violence and when it had most likely been orchestrated by the Breakers.

The combination of Wufei's detective skills and reasoning, and Duo's intimate knowledge of Freeport and its citizens, was shaking results out of Freeport's steel jungle, too. But trying to tie all these pieces of guesswork, instinct, hearsay and incomplete or unreliable information together was like trying to knit fog. They still had only the vaguest idea of the final Breaker agenda.

Wufei was concentrating on the display he was scrolling through. He was not watching the clock.
He didn't need to; his internal timer was excellent, so he was perfectly aware that Duo had been gone two hours and fifteen minutes, without having to refer to a bloody clock.

What the hell was he up to...?

Concentrate.

Wufei tried. He stared at the tangle of information before him. The only thing he could really think of was that he shouldn't be trawling through all this data alone.

...Duo had only gone to get dinner...

The bastard was probably slacking off, Wufei growled to himself. Not that he could blame Duo if the latter wanted to take a break from the Breakers, the endless mounds of data and this bloody one-room apartment. It had been over three weeks ago since Wufei had refused Trowa's recall order; three weeks of intensive, dangerous work with few breaks and less sleep, and it didn't really feel like they were making any progress in the case. They were both getting irritable.

Two hours, twenty minutes. Where the hell did he go to get that food? L1?!

This was the third time in two weeks that Duo had disappeared like that, without any explanation. He was never gone more than a few hours. He was always just a bit too laidback and evasive when he returned.

The first few days after Wufei had cut his connections to the Outside, they'd been both burning with exultation and breathless freedom. The two ex-Pilots were on their own, and, being who they were, they found that more liberating than frightening. Their alliance had grown strong. Wufei felt as if he'd truly earned Duo's trust now. They were a team, fully allies in a way they hadn't even been during the war.

And the sex was pretty good, whenever they could make the time. Actually, Wufei conceded, staring blindly at the screen, the sex was great.

But then Duo had started to disappear for a few hours. And he was occasionally withdrawn. Wufei didn't know if this was just the result of the long hours of work, or if something was truly bothering his friend. Or if he, Wufei, was getting close to earning that 'Paranoid' tag the Preventer High Command had tried to pin on him.

Quiet footsteps in the hallway. Wufei's hand was on his sword even as he recognized the familiar gait.

He didn't turn around as the reinforced security net was unlocked and the door opened. Duo walked in on the tail end of a waft of cold air and the familiar Freeport smell of iron and chemicals.

"Where have you been?" Wufei asked without turning around, his fingers once more interlaced and supporting his chin as he stared at the screen.

"I told you I was getting some chow."

A bag of chips and a couple of foil-wrapped objects landed on the workbench five feet away from Wufei; sandwiches, the kind the commissary distributed, guaranteed to be nutritious, fairly healthy and utterly tasteless.

"Our commissary is only five blocks away."
"There was a queue," said Duo, which in itself wouldn't be surprising. There was always a queue; it was kind of expected, and nobody really complained much about it. There was no such thing as the rat-race or business-deal deadlines in Freeport. Citizens treated time a bit cavalierly, especially since they never had enough of it anyway.

"You waited for sandwiches for two hours?" Wufei probed. He was getting used to Duo's patterns of evasion. Just because Duo said there was a queue didn't mean that that was what he'd been doing all this time.

"Aw, did you miss me?" was the sarcastic reply, which answered both Wufei's asked and unasked question.

Wufei's intertwined fingers flexed, but he didn't pick up the gauntlet. They'd not needed - or had time for - their 'practice bouts' in the yard for the last few weeks, and Wufei found that he didn't really want to start them again, not now. They were both too tired and tense; it might get ugly.

Movement behind him, and silence. Wufei could feel Duo looking over his shoulder, staring at the screen. He knew what Duo's expression would be. He glanced up almost reluctantly to confirm it.

There it was. That edge of savage darkness in the harsh dagger of a half-smile, in the blue eyes staring unblinking at the Breaker's web on the small display. At this moment, Duo looked older than he had any right to be.

Wufei was seeing that look more and more often. Was it because he and Duo were nearing their prey? Or was he seeing this side of Duo more frequently simply because Duo had let Wufei in past the light-hearted persona of the cheerful smuggler, and the Preventer was now seeing the deeper, more dangerous currents that moved Duo Maxwell?

Or maybe something was bugging Duo. In that case, Wufei had to trust that the blasted adrenaline junky wasn't about to do anything brash or impulsive.

Wufei and 'trust' didn't get along very well. He was constantly having to remind himself that Duo had put himself on the line for Wufei time and again, despite lies and evasions on Wufei's part. That past shame still burned. It kept Wufei from saying anything about Duo's absences, once again. He did trust Duo on a professional and personal level; the man was more level-headed than he appeared to be. As for the rest...if Duo wished to discuss what was troubling him, he knew he could confide in Wufei.

Wufei felt fairly certain that hell would freeze over before that would happen, which in a way was a good thing, as Wufei wouldn't know what to do with a heart-to-heart discussion if it came up and stabbed him in a lung.

Duo slowly leaned into Wufei and gave him a full-body nudge, interrupting the Preventer's scattered train of thought.

"You hungry?"

"I was hungry two and a half hours ago. Now I'm starving," Wufei groused, glancing up and over his shoulder again.

"No you're not," Duo corrected him mechanically, then he blinked and grinned, a more natural, cheerful smile. "Sorry about taking so long, but I got more bad news for ya. We're going to be eating on the run. While I was out there-"

"Waiting in the queue?" Wufei asked a bit snidely, irritation and concern defeating his resolve to not
say anything until Duo was ready to speak to him about it, if ever.

"No, on my way back," Duo answered without losing a beat. "Anyway, somebody dropped me a note. We got to be in sector D8 in thirty minutes."

"We'll be late then," Wufei answered, grabbing his sword as he stood, stiff from sitting so long. "Unless we're lucky with the shuttle and then run the rest of the way, we can't make it to D8 in that time. Who are we meeting?"

"A snitch, and it's okay if we're a few minutes late. He'll wait if he knows what's good for him."

"An informant?"

"'Informant'? Nah, that's too good for him. This guy is just a snitch," Duo sniffed with obvious distaste. This must be one of the roaches that crawled through the underbelly of Freeport, like Basil the Rat and others they'd met. These creatures were unpleasant, and they could be dangerous. Wufei checked that his various weapons were in place and easily accessible. He grabbed his jacket, a few essentials and the sandwich with some resignation, and headed towards the door on Duo's heels.

--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Industrial sectors were not given the names of past revolutionaries, just numbers and letters, reflecting their functional role and design. Factories and warehouses sprawled on either side of the large road, open yards stretching here and there, full of containers, batches of produce and junk.

Sector D8 was in the middle of its night cycle; the factories were silent, the streets empty. It was probably why the snitch had chosen this time and place for a meeting. It wasn't easy arranging a secret meeting in Freeport without dozens of eyes on you at all times.

Wufei walked a few steps behind Duo, far enough apart to not be taken in one ambush, close enough for support in a fight. Duo had not started any of his usual rambling conversations, and Wufei wasn't a chatterbox by nature, so the entire trip was spent in silence.

That silence made the small rasp behind them all the louder, like the noise of a pebble bouncing down an avalanche slope.

Wufei was on the ground instantly, hands stinging where they'd slapped into the cold metal of the street; the crossbow quarrel slammed into a man-high bobbin of cable above his head. The fool who'd taken aim at Wufei had fingered the trigger before firing; the string of the crossbow had creaked. A stupid mistake for a would-be assassin, and one he would not be repeating. But Wufei wasn't angry; in fact, the prevalent emotion he felt was relief. Finally!

He listened attentively. Footsteps, a scurry of two sets of feet, their owners taking cover. Two attackers. But only one bolt. The other man hadn't fired, or else he didn't have a projectile weapon.

Just in case there were more, Wufei lunged and rolled into the cover of the big roll of cables. Energy crackled through his frame, along with a wave of gritty relief. In the three weeks since Wufei had ignored his recall order and stayed in Freeport to track down his enemy, this was the first proof that the Breakers were falling back on Plan B. Up until now, the unspoken concern between Wufei and Duo, shortening their tempers and making their investigation that much more intense, was that they were getting nowhere; despite all their efforts, they were not getting near enough to the Breakers to
pose a threat, and could safely be ignored.

The bolt still vibrating in the bobbin of cable was proof positive that Wufei's presence in Freeport had driven somebody to attempt murder. Now they just had to find out who it was and why.

Wufei glanced around, ears pricked. He couldn't see anybody else in the shadows of the factory yard. Duo was ten feet away from him, under the cover of some big pipes sprouting out of the sector floor; he was moving swiftly and silently, circling their attackers.

Wufei kept his head down but unsheathed his sword with a noisy clang and scraped his boots on the metal concourse as he put his back to the man-high roll of cable. A sudden outburst of footsteps and a curse from Duo told Wufei that his attempt at keeping the enemy distracted had failed. The men had broken and run.

To Wufei's left, Duo scrambled over the pipes and shot after them. Wufei sheathed his sword and followed.

For an instant, he saw two figures up ahead - two men, average height, one with blonde hair. Then they dodged down an alley. Duo was halfway there already. Wufei stretched his stride, trying to keep an eye on both Duo and the streets around them in case their attackers had backup. He wasn't about to underestimate the Breakers again.

He ran down the alley, saw a flash of black leather coat disappear to the right in the street up ahead.

When Wufei emerged into the larger road, he spotted Duo a block away and gesturing at him.

"They split up! Take left!" Then he shot down the right-hand street.

Wufei didn't waste breath in acknowledgement as he followed Duo's instructions. Duo must want this lead as badly as he did, to risk Wufei going off on his own without a Handler.

After half a block, Wufei heard the footsteps of his quarry again, up ahead. He should be easy to follow; this was an industrial sector and practically uninhabited. It didn't contain any heavy machinery as it was side by side with normal 'dorm' sectors. It supported textile works, a big bakery and an engine factory. And-

Shit. The Black Hole.

Wufei and Duo had been in the large building before, following a lead. The Black Hole was one of Freeport's bars-cum-drug-dives; a place where workers went to relax, and broken souls went to die. In Wufei's eyes, the sniffers at the doors, keeping the hopped up clientele in, had seemed like the jaws of a vicious trap. The darkness inside the Black Hole had been suffocating and the music way too loud. Despite all this, the citizens of Freeport treated it like one more piece of entertainment instead of the seedy anteroom to Hell that it was.

His prey was heading straight for it.

It made sense; it was the only part of sector D8 that had a lot of people in and around it at this time of 'night'. Wufei didn't even know what his target looked like. If the man reached it, he'd lose himself in the crowd around the bar.

Wufei broke into a desperate sprint. There were faint echoes of music in the distance, tinny and full of percussion. Up ahead, Wufei saw a blond man in a dark jacket dodge between two buildings, silhouette briefly outlined by the glow of floodlights near the joint.
It was probably too late, but Wufei had to try. He made his way to where his target had disappeared and glanced around cautiously.

The Black Hole boasted other attractions besides drinking and drugs. There was a huge pit outside full of oddly shaped blocks of cement. It was officially for testing secondary engines and circuits from a local factory; part of it formed a crude wind tunnel. But when Freeport didn't need it for factory testing, it could be used as a skating or boarding rink, concert pit, a paintball field, an outdoor cinema or the reckoning ground for public duels between gangs.

There were scores of people sitting on the concrete blocks and on the lips of the pit. There would probably be some entertainment later, or maybe it was already finished and these people were relaxing and chatting before going back for a short rest and then another day in the factories and shipyards. Citizens milled around, talking, laughing and drinking - non-alcoholic drinks, since they were outside the perimeter of the Black Hole's sniffers. Finding one lone runner in that crowd was nearly impossible, especially since Wufei couldn't leave the protection of the alleyway; not with a Blade's collar and no Handler nearby. He stood in the shadows, eyes scanning the crowd for signs of someone running or dodging into the Black Hole or another alley. But if the man was smart, he'd sit down and act casual and Wufei would have lost him for good.

People were moving around, some were leaving, waving goodbye to friends...Wufei's eyes skipped from face to face, looking for the fugitive and failing to find him.

But there were a couple of people looking at Wufei now. One of those nearest to him was staring at his collar and frowning. Damn.

He prudently stepped back into the alley, walking away slowly and trying to radiate innocence from his shoulder blades. But he wasn't as good at it as Duo was; when he was far enough from the Black Hole for the music to fade, he heard quick footsteps behind him.

"Hey, you!"

Wufei turned calmly down a side street, and, once out of sight, bolted towards the gap between two buildings. It was blocked by a six-foot high chain link fence. Wufei didn't grip the noisy metal wire, but sprung up lightly onto a box nearby and leapt. His hand hit the top bar of the fence, elbow bending to cushion the impact. He vaulted over it cleanly, barely making it shiver, landed in a crouch on the other side and dived towards a bank of shadows beneath a fire escape.

The footsteps vacillated between hurried and cautious. Three or four people. He caught sight of one of them as she paused near the gap between buildings; a woman in her forties dangling a bottle from her fingers, a frown on her face as she looked around, visibly puzzled. Someone behind her spoke. Wufei heard the word 'collar' and a question. In Wufei's field of vision, the woman shrugged.

Wufei crept away cautiously. As usual, he was impressed by the attitude of Freeport Citizens to challenge anything out of place that they saw; a refreshing change from the apathy and 'not my problem' attitude of the people the Preventers interviewed after murders and shootouts in the rest of the Space Sphere. It was to their credit that the colony's inhabitants took such a personal interest in anything that might threaten their sector, but damn, it was a nuisance for him sometimes.

He made it back to the junction where he'd split up with Duo, and walked swiftly down the road his friend had taken. Duo had been closer on his target's tail than Wufei had been. If he'd caught his man, he shouldn't be too far up ahead. Hopefully Wufei had lost his followers, but if they found him again, he wanted his Handler nearby.

There was a choked scream up ahead and the sound of a body hitting a flat surface.
Every one of Wufei's alarms shot to Red. His sword was in his hand and he charged towards the sound, forgetting anybody who might be following him. If there'd been someone waiting in ambush-if that was Duo screaming- if they hurt Duo, they were going to die.

A bank of dusty neon was bleeding raw light over two figures up against a factory wall. The man on the ground wasn't Duo, to Wufei's immediate relief. Duo was standing over the fallen man, a fist raised back, the other hand twisted in the man's collar and pinning him to the prefab plastic.

Their attacker was a Caucasian male in his late twenties, dressed in a factory one-piece suit and a worn jacket. One of the man's hands was raised in dazed defense. The bottom half of his face was red with blood from his nose. The other hand was curled up against his stomach, protected by his bent legs. The fingers were scuffed and twisted, as if they'd been stomped on by a boot. He was wheezing in a way that didn't sound too good.

"Talk." Duo's voice was deadly.

The man made a noise of pain deep in his chest, and fresh blood trickled from his nose.


The beaten attacker stared up at Duo, then his split lips moved.

"Fuck you-- -c'n kill me... won't talk..."

"Yeah? You'd be surprised." Duo drew back his fist slowly. The man flinched, but there was a light in his eyes that Wufei recognized as he drew near. It was the sort of fanaticism that Treize had inspired.

"Go 'head, but I won' le' you destroy F-Freepor'," the man hissed, a bubble of blood popping incongruously from his lips. Then he hunched up, as if expecting an immediate retaliation.

Wufei shook his head. Great, some lead this was. This guy was probably a Breaker, but he seemed to be as zealous as the men who'd dared to invade Recyc to get at Herb. He wasn't going to be much help, not without applying the kind of means that Wufei, for one, wouldn't stoop to. What were they going to do with-...

His senses suddenly pricked. Duo hadn't moved; he was still standing with one hand twisted in the man's jacket and the other raised in a fist. His eyes had gone wide but the pupils had shrunk to dangerous pinpoints and he was smiling in a way that made Wufei's mouth suddenly go dry.

The man twitched, one arm lowering a bit as he glanced up cautiously through swollen eyes-

The blow caught him against the chin and smashed him back into the wall.

Duo's hand disappeared from view and reappeared in the instant it took Wufei to blink. A flick-knife gleamed balefully under the light.

"Duo?!" he said, alarmed.

The blue eyes twitched towards him, as if his ally had momentarily forgotten his presence.

"He attacked us," Duo said, his eyes back on the man at his feet. "Tried to kill us where there were no witnesses."

Wufei gave the empty streets around them a pointed look. "So you're about to do the same?"
"Don't worry," Duo said in a parody of a pleasant tone. "I'll carve my name on him after I'm done. Anybody got a complaint, they can come and see me."

"No." Wufei's word was halfway between an order and an appeal. Duo was serious, Wufei could feel it. Deadly serious, and not inclined to stop, and Wufei wasn't sure how much influence he had at this juncture. Something had set Duo off, bad. Wufei hadn't seen this coming, but something in him thought he should have...

Duo's hard gaze slowly lifted from his victim to Wufei. A second went by, another...then the ugly light went out of his eyes. Or maybe it was just banked a while. Wufei relaxed, no longer quite as concerned even when Duo braced himself and hauled the man up by a fistful of collar.

"You tell your boss-" Duo interrupted himself with a snort. Without a further word, he slammed the man, who was all but unconscious anyway, against the wall and stalked off.

Wufei hesitated, looking down at their precious lead bleeding on the metal of the street. Just as he was about to say something, he heard footsteps echo somewhere behind him. The people who'd been following him previously? Or maybe other Black Hole patrons, or factory workers putting in some overtime. Either way, he and Duo probably shouldn't hang around. He fell into step in the safety of Duo's shadow.

"What about the snitch?" Wufei asked, trying to keep up. Duo was walking fast.

"He'll be long gone by now, he wouldn't have waited for us this long," Duo growled without looking back at him. They were nearly at D8's sector wall, with an out-of-the-way airlock that their attacker had probably been running towards in his attempt to escape. "If the bastard was even there in the first place."

"No, I meant, we need to find him; someone got him to set us up, we need to know who," Wufei said, lengthening his stride. He'd been keeping an eye out for people following them as soon as they left Makhno, just as he had been continuously for the past few weeks. Nobody could have tailed them from their home, he was sure of that. That meant the assassins were waiting for them in an ambush and they knew Wufei and Duo would be there.

"Why bother? It won't be the Breakers." Duo hit the airlock release with unnecessary force, and stepped through quickly. "We know that's not the way they operate. They'll have asked one of their connections to pressure the rat into luring us out here, but he won't know anything concrete."

"You can't be sure of that. Shouldn't we at least talk to him? Where does he live?"

Duo was already at the other lock leading to the next sector. He didn't answer.

"Duo? Do you at least know who that was back there? The name of the guy who attacked us? Did you recognize him?"

The black coat was beating against Duo's legs as he walked up ahead, out the airlock and into the street.

"Duo?!"

The next sector wasn't an industrial sector, there were a few people about: a cart owner half asleep next to some homemade wares, and a few mothers with young children walking down the street. This sector was at the start of its day cycle. Wufei bit his tongue and followed the silent tread of his Handler.
He automatically kept an eye on their surroundings on the way back, though he didn't think they were at risk in the more crowded areas. He was also thinking hard. He was trying to fit the attack in some kind of pattern he could assign to the Breakers, and failing.

Here was a group so tight in their security and secrecy that nobody in Freeport even knew they existed. They'd gone to huge, expensive lengths to bribe the Preventers and get them to pull Wufei off their back. That had failed. And this was their next strike? Sending out two lone assassins, amateurs at that? If they wanted to kill Wufei, why wasn't Carver helping them? Along with Tor Kendle and thirty men, like the force they had sent after Herb in Recyc?

Blank, exhausted faces surrounded him in the shuttle, workers returning home. Wufei met each and every scrutiny with his own, familiar with Freeport's ways by now.

This row upon row of eyes was perhaps the reason why the Breakers hadn't moved in force. What had happened in Recyc was exceptional, but apart from the Trolls, nobody in Freeport had been aware of it, and the Trolls didn't share information outside their 'temple', particularly if it exposed a weakness of theirs. If they didn't know who the Breakers were, their ability to retaliate would be limited. That was why the Breakers on that strike force had been stripped of all personal effects; to avoid giving any lead if they were caught. It had been a huge risk for the Breakers, nonetheless...But it was nothing like the risk of openly attacking Wufei and Duo where everyone in Freeport might see it. You couldn't move a thirty-man attack force around in this colony discreetly, that just didn't happen. It would lead to questions among people who were a good deal less secretive than the Trolls.

Then why not a few professional assassins, like Carver? That would be discreet enough to get rid of Wufei and Duo without too much of a risk. That was the thing Wufei couldn't figure out.

The shaking of the shuttle car was numbing him, pounding into his head like the questions that were gathering without answers.

Lesley...Herb's sister. According to her, Herb had said there was somebody else after him, somebody other than Wufei and Duo. And Carver was a striking figure. He was also a Blade, and not supposed to wander away from his Handler, though Wufei was ready to bet that Carver lost the collar whenever it suited him; the Breakers were not big on rules. Wufei hadn't been about to believe Herb's assumptions without proof, but the Breaker's behavior did make it look like there might be something behind it. The Breakers were not just hiding from Wufei and Duo. Maybe somebody else was watching them and their key men like Carver. If they wanted to keep their presence in Freeport a secret, they had to be careful.

So why this pitiful attack tonight?

Wufei watched the stations drag past. They'd be back in Mahkno in a few minutes. Frustration and the remains of adrenaline were twisting in his throat. The Breakers had made their move, and Wufei had been unable to capitalize on it, or even understand it.

He was missing something...or he didn't have some crucial piece of information. He stared at Duo's reflection in the grimy window. The cheap plastic pane was full of scratches. They bled the light from the carriage's weak neon, dissipating the smuggler's image until Wufei could barely make it out.
Chapter 29

"Je suis l'enfant terrible
D'un monde en guerre
Je suis l'enfant maudit
Né de la peste
Je suis né comme un fou
Je suis né peste rouge
Je suis l'enfant naturel
D'une société cancéreuse
Je suis l'enfant rebelle
Et la loi est dang'reuse

Fils de-... !
Fils de-... !"

(I'm the bastard child
of a world at war
I'm the cursed child
Born of the plague
I was born insane
I was born a red disease
I'm the by-blow
Of a cancerous society
I'm the rebel child
And the law is dangerous

Son of a-...
Son of a-... )

---Beruriers Noirs, 'Fils de...'

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Duo walked through the apartment without even removing his coat and went straight to the yard. His body language and actions clearly spelled out that he needed some alone time, but Wufei was having none of it. He followed, temper and some concern seething behind his customary stern expression.

"Who was that man?" he asked, stopping a few yards from where Duo had picked up the basketball.

"No idea," Duo answered with a shrug.

Don't give me that, Wufei growled inwardly. "You don't know his name, I take it. But you've seen him before?"

"Could be."
"Who- where does he live?"

"No idea," Duo repeated.

"Where did you see him before, then?" Wufei ground out.

Duo just tossed the ball at the hoop. The ball fell neatly through the metal and bounced back obediently to Duo's waiting hands. Wufei watched it, and spoke just as Duo started the next throw.

"It was Kropotkin, wasn't it."

The ball struck the outside of the hoop with a clang and bounced and rolled in Wufei's direction.

Duo was looking at Wufei, his face unreadable for once.

Wufei picked up the ball and tossed it at Duo with maybe a bit more force than warranted.

"I don't have your expertise in Freeport society, but I'm not stupid, Maxwell, I-"

"No, you're not," Duo said. He'd caught the ball and tossed it one-handed at the hoop without even really looking. It bounced off the board and through the metal. Wufei glared at it.

"In Recyc, we faced two kinds of adversaries. Some were pirates or killers. They came from all over the colony. But there were also a fair number of regular citizens. 'Just people' you called them. And they all came from either Kropotkin or Goldman, the next sector over. I knew that surprised you. These are so-called respectable sectors, they normally don't breed riffraff and malcontents."

Duo had picked up the ball again. His eyes had twitched towards Wufei at the 'so-called', but he didn't say anything.

"Tor Kendle lives in Kropotkin too. So do a few others we know of. I'm starting to think these people in Kropotkin are the core elements."

Duo tossed the ball at the hoop again, with his left hand this time. It fell through.

"The Breakers would do anything to stay hidden from the Preventers and even the rest of Freeport," Wufei continued heavily. "They would probably not induct any new member into their group unless they were sure of that person, and in Freeport, the best way to be sure of someone is to live in the same sector, where you know your neighbors as well as you know your own family. Am I correct?"

"On the money," Duo drawled, catching the ball on the rebound and twirling it on the tip of his finger. Wufei remembered him doing that a few weeks ago, just before Wufei had told Duo he was going to stay, that he was going to defy the Preventer high command and stick with the investigation. He remembered Duo's sudden fierce smile, eyes bright with enthusiasm and approval. Wufei felt a stab of some undefined emotion in his gut.

"So the logical conclusion is that the Breaker conspiracy started in Kropotkin," Wufei said, suppressing the memory and the feelings to concentrate on the facts and the theories arising from them. "That's where they're the most heavily implanted, that's where their leaders will be. But Frank Ravachol doesn't live in that sector. He lives in Mooncurse. He doesn't even have many friends in Kropotkin, you said."

"Yup."

"I'm starting to think he's not the Boss after all. He may be a lieutenant, or possibly an ally of the
Breakers. But the boss, and the heart of the Breakers, we haven't yet discovered." Which was why
the Breakers weren't yet all that frantic to silence Wufei and Duo as they had Herb.

"Brilliant, detective," Duo said, hooping the ball again.

Wufei watched him, eyes narrowed. Considering the confusing tangle of incomplete information
they had, yes, it was a good deduction. Wufei was a good cop; he had an instinct for criminal
conspiracy. He'd figured it out despite his lack of knowledge of Freeport.

An astute native like Duo should have had his suspicions weeks ago, when they'd started to tail Tor
Kendle. At about the time Duo had become a bit withdrawn and started to disappear on his own for
hours on end.

Wufei watched the swish of the long, black leather coat, the flash of boots beneath it as Duo moved
across the floor with the ball, playing one-on-one with shadows.

"You have a lot of friends in Kropotkin, don't you," Wufei finally said.

"Yeah, a lot of old Sweepers settled there, and some of the ex-rebs from L2 who helped me during
the war."

Wufei waited, but Duo didn't add anything. Fine. Wufei crossed his arms over his chest.

"You think some of them are involved." His voice had hardened.

"That could well be," Duo answered casually.

"I'd like to say that I'll spare them. I'd like to say that I'll let them go and forget they were ever
involved. But if they are responsible for crimes..."

Wufei knew he sounded intransigent and stubborn. He needed Duo's help to corner these people. He
should be flexible and willing to compromise. Wufei could do that if he was forced to, but not in
these sorts of circumstances, and not just for friendship. If there wasn't some greater need for those
men to go free, then Wufei was not going to put them on his list and wait years to get them, and he
was certainly not going to just forget them entirely.

Duo glanced over his shoulder at Wufei, with a strange, illuminating smile that seemed more
dangerous than a weapon. "Is that what's eating you, Chang? Don't worry. If any of my buddies are
involved - and so far, I found none of them that are, which is good. But if some of them fell in with
this gang, I wont be asking you to let them squirm out. Space puppies like us, we live and die by our
decisions. That's the way it goes. You and me, we're on the same wavelength here."

"Glad to hear it. I'll trust you on that."

"You can, you can," Duo assured him airily. "We're going after the Breakers and we're gonna
destroy them. Every one of them."

"...Good."

Wufei - the Preventer - knew that Duo was telling the truth. He trusted the man, the ally. It was only
a small part of Wufei, a part he normally didn't listen to, that didn't like the way Duo was speaking. It
was that casual tone he'd used during the war, when killing was something you did to keep score
between Us and Them, something that didn't matter. It was a tone that was unusual for the adult
Duo, and one Wufei hadn't particularly wanted to hear again.
"If I find any of my buddies meddled in this...I won't ask you to let them get out. But there's one thing I want." Duo was staring up at the hoop instead of Wufei. "I want to deal with them myself. Once we bring the Breakers down, you'll be able to arrest them when they try to make a run for it on the Outside. I damn well hope that fucker Carver rots in jail until he dies at the age of a hundred. But my buddies...I'll take care of it here, in Freeport. You won't need to know about it."

Wufei's conscience prickled uncomfortably. "Duo..."

"Some of these guys, I owe them my life. Don't worry, I won't let them go. But I'll take care of them myself. That's what's owed."

Wufei suddenly had his suspicions about what Duo had been doing these past few weeks. Duo would have been conducting his own investigation on his friends, despite the risk to himself that could entail. It was likely that some of these people were wanted by the law; gunrunners, murderers, old rebels on the terrorist watch list...Duo had been checking up on them alone so that if they were involved in something illegal but not Breaker-related, Wufei wouldn't be in the moral obligation to arrest them some time in the future. Duo knew Wufei too well, it would seem.

But if any of these friends turned out to be Breakers, then Duo would deal with them directly and bloodily, according to Freeport's cruel laws. Wufei remembered the light glancing off a drawn knife and spoke without thinking.

"That man who attacked us tonight, is he one of your friends?"

"Huh? No, I've only seen him a couple of times before, in Kro."

Yes, Duo had said that earlier, Wufei had forgotten. Which was unlike him, his mind was normally like a trap for important, mission-related facts. He felt tense, off-balance and he wondered why.

Duo suddenly snickered. "Did you see the look on his face? When I drew on him? They always think they'll die a hero, and then you put the knife on their throat and suddenly it's, 'oh shit, this is really happening and I never knew I liked breathing this much'. Hah."

Wufei knew the look very well, he'd seen it quite a few times, though not today; he'd been watching Duo when the knife had appeared. The memory of a swollen, bloody face did go through his mind, words stuttered through broken teeth...that single, dangerous moment when Duo's eyes had gone hard...the flash of the blade beneath streetlights...

"He said you were going to destroy Freeport," said Wufei, puzzled, as another odd piece of memory popped up on the flow of recollection.

"Yeah."

"...That's rich, coming from a Breaker. Why the hell would he say that?"

"Well, that's easy." Duo was smiling down at the ball in his hands, a slash of a grin like the one he wore when he was called Shinigami. "Think about it. Kropotkin is a sector of freedom fighters and anarchists. Breakers or not, Freeport's their home. And I'm a loner who's working for a cop."

"That's not..." Wufei's objection never really materialized. Unfortunately, what Duo had said wasn't entirely wrong.

"It must look pretty obvious to them," Duo added, stuffing the ball beneath his arm and turning on himself slowly. "In their eyes, we're the spearhead of the invading forces. Or rather, the forces of justice and order, since it's you. That's what it must look like. Of course, it's not gonna be quite that
Duo wasn't looking at Wufei, he was staring dreamily at the corners of his junk yard.

"Democracy triumphs. If the Preventers tried to move in directly, the Elders would have detonated the colony's core. But in this case? When people find out what the Breakers were doing...cause you and I know what they're doing. They're trying to drag the rest of the Space Sphere into another fight with the Earthers. But people here hate war; this place is too full of refugees, people who lost it all. When they realize some home-grown elements were trying to start a fucking war right under their noses...well, damn, they'll be so shook up, so scared of what's inside and out, that they'll welcome that peacekeeping force with open arms. Then those that can't accept what's coming will fight. And we'll see it all burn."

Peacekeeping force. That was what the Alliance had called itself when it had invaded L2 and the other Lagrange Point colonies, years ago.

Duo was staring at his yard as if he could see it in flames already, but he was smiling in a way that chilled Wufei to the bone, and Wufei had not considered himself to be all that sensitive to chills. He was no longer on the outside, catching glimpses of that inner darkness; he'd stepped right into it. Almost as if he'd become a part of it. Something was opening before him, something he'd not seen before, and he-

"Stop it."

Wufei had said it without thinking. Duo started and glanced up as if he'd forgotten the other man was present.

Wufei wasn't entirely sure what he was asking Duo to stop. When Duo got into one of those moods, when he started to smile that dangerously flat grin and speak in those curt, hard words, Wufei let him be and a few minutes later, Duo was always back to normal.

"Sorry, mind wandered for a sec," Duo said dismissively, hooping the ball again. It rattled against the metal and nearly didn't go in.

Wufei could have dropped the subject...He probably should have dropped it. There was something dangerous hanging in the air, and there had been ever since Duo had nearly knifed an unarmed man earlier.

Wufei didn't drop it.

"What the hell are you talking about? Whoever mentioned a peacekeeping force?"

"Don't worry about it," Duo said, his eyes blind as they followed the ball's progress mechanically. "Just don't worry about it. It's bound to happen. It's what always happens. Maybe that's what's *gotta* happen, even. I mean, for Relena's pretty future. Clean up Freeport, the rest of the slums will follow, and then there won't be a dirty corner left in the Space Sphere-"

"If this is a joke, Maxwell, it's not funny."

"Joke?" Duo chuckled dryly. "I don't kid around about something like-"

"Stop talking this nonsense when you don't mean it!"

Wufei's sharp words hung in the echoes of the yard.
Duo froze, ball in hand. He turned towards Wufei, a dangerous look in his eyes. "I don't say what I don't mean, Chang. Unlike some people, I don't tell lies."

The barb, whether intended for him or not, sparked Wufei's temper further. "Bull, Maxwell. You'd die for this pit and we both know it. You wouldn't stand by if- I do not intend to bring in a peacekeeping force! I don't know what the hell you're on about!"

"Maybe you don't want to know." Duo's voice was soft. He was staring at Wufei now as if he'd never seen him before. "Piece of advice, stay outta my head. It's better all around. Hang around with a spacer like me too much, you'll get funny ideas. And we wouldn't want that. You just carry on, copper. Help Peacecraft build her future. She needs her running dog to keep her clean while you cull the opposition, scare off the journalists and lean on the union workers."

Wufei stiffened, the blow catching him completely off guard.

"I'm just a spacer. I don't get all this 'greater good' stuff. You need to steer clear of gene-trash like me, Chang. You might get contaminated and forget what you're fighting for."

Duo looked ready for a fight. His hold on the ball had loosened and he'd inched his left foot back to brace himself. He was watching Wufei in something like bloody anticipation. But Wufei felt no anger and no will to fight. What Duo had just said was the truth, nothing more and nothing less. There was only one word Wufei could object to. His voice was flat, strangely calm, and distant in his own ears when he spoke.

"Stop calling yourself gene-trash."

There was a dark fire burning in Duo's eyes as he laughed. The sound danced manically around the broken pieces of metal strewn about them.

"Why? Can't stand the word? Oh, sorry, that not PC? But I am gene-trash, Lord Chang, and if that does your head in, maybe you shouldn't have let me fuck you."

This was provocation, pure and simple, but Wufei felt removed from it, the words scurrying by him like rats without touching him. He'd rarely felt so calm.

"I wasn't counting on having your babies, Maxwell, so the quality of your genes leaves me completely indifferent."

He had the cold satisfaction of seeing a crack appear in Duo's manic facade as the smuggler blinked in astonishment. Wufei continued, his words flat and measured.

"I don't want you to use a racist, belittling term when talking about yourself because it's ugly, it's distasteful, and because you don't mean it. You've never been ashamed of your origins. If someone looks down on you for it, you get mad or you get even; you don't lose time in self-pity. You're only throwing this garbage in my face to get me to back off. Fine. You could have just told me to leave the subject alone. I would have. I owe you too much for your help to date to repay you as it is. As long as you assist me on my mission, you can keep your reasons to yourself. I'm not going to pry into something that's none of my business."

Wufei could hear the rigid propriety in his words. As he turned to go, he wondered when he'd started to sound so much like his father.

"That easy, huh?" Duo muttered behind him.

"We're both tired," Wufei said crisply without looking around. "We've been sleeping and eating
irregularly, we've been working long hours and we were just attacked. We need a break. I'll forget what you just said."

"That's mighty big of you." The ball thumped sardonically against the wall. "But you're probably right."

"I'm going to bed."

"I'll stay out awhile longer. We could probably do with a cool-off."

Wufei closed the door behind him in silent agreement.

Wufei tossed off his jacket and shirt, and then froze, hands on his belt, when he heard the yard door open to the alley behind the building. Despite his own words about a break and Duo's suggestion that they 'cool off', Wufei was not going to let Duo wander the streets alone a mere hour after they'd been ambushed. Wufei stalked towards the door, but then heard a scuffle nearby, and a thump on the roof of the yard.

He listened without moving. Duo's footsteps crossed the roof of the junkyard shed. Then there was a creak nearly above Wufei's head. Duo was climbing the emergency ladder that went up to the top of the building and its flat roof. He'd gone up there a few times before; once after Ravachol's visit and once after Agostina had refused to talk to them the second time. It was Duo's way of being alone in a city teeming with people, in an apartment he had to share with somebody else.

Wufei hesitated, then wondered why he was even thinking of following. Duo had made it quite clear he didn't want to discuss this, whatever 'this' was, and Wufei had no desire to intrude or get verbally savaged again. So he went to bed.

He lay on his back, eyes wide open. After a minute, he realized he was glaring at the ceiling as if he could see Duo skulking up on the roof. Wufei turned, rustling the sheets in irritation, and chose to glare at the wall instead. He was finally starting to feel angry, that strange numbness fading to be replaced with his usual temper.

They'd had fights before. A lot of them. They both had strong personalities and little patience. He'd been angry at Duo before. Very angry. Downright furious sometimes. But there was a new element this time. He was finally angry, yes, but there was another emotion underlying the anger, fueling it, and he didn't want to admit to it. It made him feel weak.

He'd go to sleep. If Duo wanted to exhaust himself and deprive himself of a few hours of rest, that was his choice.

Despite his best intentions, his mind kept going back over the conversation.

*Then we'll see it all burn....That's what's gotta happen...*

Of course Duo hadn't meant that as it sounded. That was the way a terrorist talked. That was why Wufei had said Duo was talking nonsense. Which had been a stupid thing to say, Wufei conceded, mentally berating himself. Duo never lied. Wufei knew it. Duo knew he knew it. But Duo's words just didn't make sense. The whole reason Duo was hunting the Breakers was to defend Freeport. The
money thing...Carver even...they held no importance to him.

So why had Duo said-

Wufei's lips tightened in self-directed anger. Who cared? Yeah, it was obvious that Duo was struggling with something. It was also obvious that Duo didn't want Wufei's help with it, or even Wufei to get too close. Duo had made that quite clear.

The bit about- Wufei grimaced with disgust - letting Duo fuck him...that was the sort of thing Duo would think of as an insult. He hadn't needed to add that. The first few words had been the blow that counted. So that was how Duo saw him. Relena's running dog. Fair enough; he had told Duo what his real job was, after all, and that's what it boiled down to. The attacks against rebels; the intimidations; the criminals he let slip through his fingers while he attacked, for reasons of political expediency, better men who'd only tried to fight an unfair system...the parts of his 'career' Wufei felt he could never make up for, never justify...

Wufei turned around restlessly, viciously ashamed of the tiny feeling of hurt he was having to admit to.

He closed his eyes, trying to meditate and eliminate the little twist of pain. He couldn't. He wasn't used to using his inner strength for something so trivial and personal. He had never had a fight with any of his lovers before now. Their relationships had always been courteous, friendly and calm.

Or he just hadn't cared. He'd never let them into the places in his soul where they might cause some damage. He'd never given them the weapons to hurt him like he had with Duo.

Wufei stared blindly at the ceiling. He'd flipped around onto his back again without realizing.

Duo wasn't one of Wufei's safe harbors. He was a friend and a dangerous man; an ally and a wildcard. He probably had things in his psyche he had no wish to share...Wufei remembered the flash of the knife, Duo's wide eyes, pinpoint pupils as he watched the man who'd accused him of-...

Wufei rubbed his eyes until he saw spots. None of his business, as Duo had demonstrated.

But he couldn't stop thinking...

That man tonight - a man from Kropotkin, a respected sector where Duo had friends. His words had done something to Duo; something severe. Duo had nearly killed him for it. Duo had come home with that feeling still lurking at the back of his mind, and, off-balance, he'd said something to Wufei that he didn't want to share. Understandable. Wufei had had slips of the tongue before, things that accidentally revealed more than he wanted. He hated that. He acted aggressively if the person - even a friend - tried to dig deeper. There were things in his past he never wished to discuss with anybody. Duo was undoubtedly the same. They all had scars, past horrors lurking in their minds. But they were strong men who did not need the well-intended interference of others. They fought their demons alone, they won, they went on with the mission. They didn't meddle in each other's private lives.

Wufei remembered saying those exact same words to Duo, when they'd been discussing Heero. Wufei was explaining why he didn't know if his best friend was hurting or not. 'We don't meddle in each other's private lives.'

He remembered Duo's answer when he'd said that.

'Well, that's just sad.'
Wufei stared at the ceiling, stains and a spider's web gleaming under the light slipping through the blinds.

A friend didn't leave things at that. A lover didn't keep distances. Even when it hurt, he dragged the problem out and shared it. That's what Duo had done with Wufei; dragged Wufei's shame, his self-doubt, his choices of the last five years to the surface, and yeah, Duo hadn't been very happy or impressed with what he'd found. Wufei had felt vulnerable, exposed. And ultimately, forgiven and understood. Yes, even now after Duo had, in a moment of careless anger, used the weapons Wufei had himself given him to lash out. That stupid old adage, 'you always hurt the ones you care most about'—...

The thought collided with everything else that had happened that evening and something like an answer to the deeper dilemma slipped into Wufei's mind.

What was it that Duo thought he was going to hurt?

Wufei stared at the darkness in the corners of the room for a few long minutes. He was still angry, oh yes. There was so much anger...a deep-seated, diffuse rage that stretched back beyond this evening, beyond Wufei's visit to Freeport and the past five years and even the war. It had formed into something hard inside him, like a shell, a protection and a convenient set of blinkers to give him a view of the world that was as narrow as the blade of his sword.

Wufei could feel it start to crack.

Something in him gave up and he didn't even try to stop it.

"Goddamit Maxwell," Wufei growled as he threw back the covers, "I should kick your ass just for putting us both through this. Who the hell do you think you are?"

It would be wrong to say he'd made up his mind. In fact, his mind was quite divided and busy arguing with itself. The part of his soul that his ancestors had forged into a sword of justice was icily reminding him that he shouldn't have to take that kind of insult from a blasted anarchist who respected nothing, no law, no gods, no masters.

Wufei tugged on his boots and didn't bother with the laces.

His reserve was asking him what right he had to intrude into the inner soul of a fellow warrior. Wufei hated having people poke around his own self-doubts. More to the point, Wufei was starting to get rather worried about what he was going to find there. He was no fool. He knew that there was something potent and ugly powering Duo's behavior, and Wufei knew himself well enough to know he was really not going to like it. Why look for something that could cause a rift between them now, when they needed to be allies?

He slammed the door behind him and headed across the yard, feet ringing loudly on the metal.

Anyway, his pride added, if somebody was going to meet the other halfway, it should be Duo. Wufei would have respected Duo's privacy if Duo had asked him to, there was no need for the smuggler to lash out at him that viciously. Duo owed him an apology or two. He should be the one to come down and offer them.

The yard door shut firmly behind him, the security lock clicking into place. Wufei reflexively checked the alleyway for ambushers, though the poor bastard who jumped Chang Wufei tonight would not live long enough to figure out how bad his timing was. Wufei had never learned to handle inner confusion very gracefully.
He scrambled up onto the roof, the pile of garbage shifting beneath his feet. Duo made it look easy. Wufei had never been up here. He hoped the metal roof was solid. A lot of Freeport's non-essentials were prone to metal fatigue.

He hesitated at the foot of the ladder that lanced upwards into darkness, but only for a second. Then he bent down and prosaically laced up his boots to avoid ending this discussion and his entire mission prematurely by slipping on the ascent and breaking his neck.

It felt even colder up here. An icy breeze flowed above Freeport's buildings. Warped aluminum sidings creaked beneath Wufei's feet as he climbed over the parapet and set foot on the flat roof. The building's ventilation unit huffed and muttered to itself off to one side. He could barely make it out in the darkness. The pallid light of the sector's illumination had been left down in the street below. A dozen yards above his head, the curve of the sector's ceiling was peppered here and there with signal lights, looking as remote as dingy stars.

Duo was standing on the parapet on the other side of the roof, outlined by the smear of light coming from down below. His back was straight as a dagger, hands in his pockets sweeping back the long coat as he stood there and watched the sector spread out below his feet.

The braid slipped across the dark leather as Duo half-turned.

"I guess you're too mad to care, but still, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said all that shit. That was way out of order."

"Yes, it was," Wufei muttered, crossing the roof towards that dark shape.

"If you want to kick my ass, that's fine," Duo added as Wufei drew closer. He still hadn't turned around. "But not up here, that'd be stupid. Let's go down where it's safe-" He interrupted himself as Wufei climbed up onto the three-foot high parapet beside him.

Nobody moved in the streets below. Wufei had lost track of time, not that it meant much in Freeport's eternal night anyway. He didn't know if all the workers were out of the sector and in the factory and shipyards, or if this was Makhno's night cycle and they were disturbing the neighbors beneath their feet by walking across the roof. The buildings loomed like large gravestones around them, only their bases illuminated at street level. In the distance, a wash of floodlights was a pale imitation of a dawn that would rise no further. Cranes stood outlined against the distant light like skeletal arms reaching towards the blind sky, waiting for containers to be hauled up from the lower level and into this sector.

"That man in D8 was a Breaker, a criminal and a would-be murderer. He was also wrong. You won't destroy Freeport," Wufei growled, stuffing his hands into the pockets of his sweatpants.

It could have been said a bit more gracefully, Wufei conceded, but he didn't care. He glared at the opposite building as if he could blame it for the anger, for the war and for the peace, for everything that had twisted up inside him and Duo and made them what they were.

Duo's head bowed until he was staring at the street straight past his boots and the two feet of the parapet's width. There was a long silence. It was no longer hostile, despite Wufei's grumpy tone.

"Did you enjoy the war?"

Duo dropped that like they were having one of their casual conversations as they walked the streets of Freeport. Wufei scrutinized him from the corner of his eye and could detect no sarcasm, no devious verbal trap, only bleak curiosity.
"No," he grunted, because it was obvious; who enjoyed war? Then he suddenly wondered if that was entirely true. The pain and violence had been bad; the confusion and self-doubt had been worse. But behind it all, at least he'd been able to do something. He hadn't felt like he was trying to move mountains with a teaspoon.

"I did." Duo sounded matter of fact. "OZ and people like them have trampled me all my life. It felt fucking good to get back at them. More than that." Duo breathed in slowly and then shrugged. "I guess I enjoy destroying. I enjoy killing. It's...simple. It's exhilarating. And it's easier than fixing things. There's power there. It's only when you destroy it that you're truly free to create something new."

'You don't mean it', Wufei had said earlier, cutting Duo short. This was what he hadn't wanted to hear.

"You're not like that." This time he spoke a bit less arrogantly and without the blind denial. But that didn't mean he agreed.

Duo didn't answer.

Wufei stuffed his hands deeper into his pockets, feeling the tips of his fingers going numb with cold. "I've only ever seen you destroy the one regime, and I think they had it coming."

Duo let out a dry snort of amusement. But when he spoke, his voice was thoughtful. "I try not to be like that. It's like there's two people in me. One of them wants to fix things, the other wants to blow it all to hell."

"Everybody feels that way."

"Hardly 'everybody', but yeah, you probably know what I mean. The difference between us is, you guys can actually do it. Fix things, I mean."

Wufei looked at Duo's profile searchingly. 'You guys' meant the other pilots, the brothers born from blood and slaughter. When it came to soul-searching and self-examination, there were only four other people that could hold up that mirror. Only four other men who'd shared in the crime and in the salvation, and who could compare.

"You think we fix things?" Wufei muttered, his mind casting back over the last five years.

Duo's eyes were fastened on the darkness beyond the buildings and he spoke in short, easy sentences. "You try. I can't even try any more. It's gone wrong one times too many. Now I don't care. Fuck it. Let it burn. Let it all burn."

Wufei said nothing. He had the feeling that Duo had something to add. At least he hoped so.

"That's why watching you guys...sometimes it hurts. Even during the war. You guys went to fight with a plan- well, maybe not Tro at the start. Me, I kinda fell to Earth. I mean, not like a shooting star, more like an accident. When I learned about Meteor- when I learned that some brainwashed motherfucker was going to go down in that beautiful beast and kill everybody, I tried to destroy him. Deathscythe, I mean. That's generally how I approach problems anyway."

"You mean, you weren't the original pilot?" Wufei interrupted in surprise.

"Did you think I was? Me, a street-rat from L2? No, mate, I was the third backup, the one they hope they never get to because they don't trust him further then they can toss Jupiter. The only reason they even considered me a candidate was because I knew my buddy in and out; but they never let me
Wufei’s anger had been dissipating like a draining abscess, but he still managed to feel a flash of aggrieved irritation as he realized that Duo had been a novice pilot at the start of Meteor and had ended up considerably better than Wufei could ever hope to be. Damn cocky talented bastard.

"When I met you guys, I thought I'd found people like me. Folks willing to defend Space tooth and nail; rats driven into a corner and biting back. There was some of that, to start with. But...you guys changed. You evolved. You didn't have reasons at the end; you had a cause. Me, I just blew things up. Everything else I tried led me down an impasse where I was putting at risk the colonies I was trying to protect."

Duo's voice was soft now, barely audible.

"Especially Quatre. I think he's the one who made me realize. When I first met him, I thought he was a pansy. A little boy playing at being something he didn't even know about. He was a good pilot, but he was so nice. I guess I felt a bit protective of him, like he was some young kid who'd wandered into my gang and needed to be sheltered from just how ugly it can get out there...I wasn't able to protect him though. War has no mercy.

"And then...With all the shit he'd gone through, a pure-breed piece of fluff like him should have imploded. Instead, after escaping the Lunar base, I find him directing a financial empire and planning the future and thinking up strategies and- and doing stuff, achieving stuff without having to blow something up..."

"You're rather ignoring that whole messy bit with Zero," Wufei muttered.

"No. Because he beat it, didn't he. I never could. Ten minutes with that thing- fuck, I'd have blown my brains out if you tried to put me back in that box. But Quatre...shit. I guess what he believed in was stronger than Zero. Same with you, Trowa, Heero... you all started believing so strongly in your cause; peace, protection, justice- even when you were lost and exhausted and desperate you had a- a calm about you, a strength, a sense of purpose-"

"You had that too," Wufei said, though he was having a hard time remembering that teenage Duo, obscured by all he knew of the present man.

"No. I didn't have anything to believe in. I only had something to fight. The Doc used to tell me that tyrants create their own weapons of destruction. That's what I am." Duo snorted harshly. "I am gene-trash, Chang, however you pretty it up. I was tossed in a dumpster a few hours after birth and I should have died there. Most others do. They die even if they go on breathing. In the slums, being spacers means they're losers before they even run the race. They let the Alliance crush them like they deserved it. Then they'd fight like they were committing suicide, and the peacekeepers just rolled right over them as if they had all the holy right to, and no questions asked.

"But not me. I'm the piece of grit that can't be ground down. The sand in the gearbox. Each damn thing that tried to bring me down only made me tougher, like it stripped away each time something that might weaken me. The famine, the plague, the massacre...I just kept getting stronger. When I went to Earth, I had the strength to make a difference. I guess I did. But it didn't change me; I'd become too tough for the likes of Miss Peacecraft to tame. If the Alliance couldn't do it, what chance did she have?

"And after all the blood and fire...once more, things just didn't change all that much. There's still the poor and fucked, there's still the rich and the ones who screw you over. And I hadn't changed either. I can still grin and joke like nothing means a damn; I still have this rage burning inside. I want to
destroy. I want to laugh while I do it. I want everyone to live like I did so they'll stop building all
t heir glittery futures on high ideals, and only worry about surviving another day. Then there would
be nothing more to destroy. Nothing more to lose."

There was a moment of increasingly tense silence.

"And on top of all that, I talk too much," Duo muttered, his grin more of a rictus, his eyes twitching
towards Wufei and back again as if he wanted to see Wufei's reaction and feared it as well.

Wufei knew where that fear was coming from. You dragged something like that out from the depth
of your soul where it had festered in darkness like an infection, you exposed it to a man you
respected, and then you saw just how ugly it was in the reflection of his eyes. Wufei remembered
sitting down on a barrel in the wasteland in front of Recyc, staring at his sword rather than looking
up to see the condemnation in Duo's eyes. He'd have been happier tied to a rack and at OZ's mercy.

"You want to know what I think?" Wufei finally asked.

"Does it involve reading me my rights at some point?" Duo asked, the irony in his tone brittle.

"I don't like this part of you," Wufei said bluntly. It was, in fact, an understatement. "It's what leads
to war, terror and the death of innocents. I arrest people who think that way on a monthly basis."

Duo's smirk widened, a cruel gash as he looked away.

"But that's only a part of you, and it's a part you fight much more effectively than I could with a gun
and a set of handcuffs," Wufei continued. "The Duo Maxwell I know is not a terrorist, or a rabid
destructive anarchist. He's an adrenaline junkie, a fighter, and not entirely sane, but he's not a danger
to the public. Or do you think I'd just forget that Aries unit you were fixing the first day I got here?"

Duo didn't say anything, but Wufei knew he was listening to every word now.

"If you really thought that way, you'd have let the Libra fall to Earth. Tabula Rasa. Instead, you went
to considerable risk to stop that from happening. Yes, I have to agree; you're not good at following
orders, thinking about the greater good and fixing what's broken in our society. But when you
destroyed - even when you enjoyed it - you always had something to defend at your back. Maybe
that doesn't sound very important to you, maybe it's not that far away from mindlessly destroying an
enemy for the sake of it. But I've learned that such thin margins make a considerable difference. It's
why you're here, right? In Freeport. Not Outside, running guns or drugs. And you're not part of the
Breakers, either, even if some of your friends are. Even if people like Ravachol have given up and
turned on everything...you haven't."

Duo was silent for awhile. He was staring down into the street, his boot idly kicking the parapet. The
half-grin had faded, but so had some of the tension in his shoulders. Wufei didn't think he'd actually
changed Duo's mind about the power of destruction that lurked inside his soul, barely leashed. The
God of Death. No wonder Duo had chosen that nickname. No, words couldn't absolve him of that;
Wufei knew it only too well. But to share it, to have someone understand it, even forgive a small
portion of it...it brought a breath of relief, of acceptance for what couldn't be changed. Wufei's words
had not been given lightly; in fact, he suspected he would be meditating on what Duo had said for a
long time to come, trying to accept this hateful part of his friend, as well as the small reflection of it
he knew existed in his own soul. But he trusted Duo. He trusted Duo's strength to protect him,
Wufei, and everybody else in this colony, from Shinigami.

This unshakable trust was not based on logic or anything reasonable. This was not something one
could quantify, or prove. It looked like Wufei was still capable of a little bit of faith after all...Maybe
that, more than forgiveness and understanding, was what had removed some of the hardness and self-condemnation from Duo's eyes tonight.

"Yeah, you're right. That's why I came to Freeport," Duo finally sighed. "This place is a shit hole, but it can absorb people like me. Gives us something to do; something to fight. Safer all around, for me and for the Outside. Or at least that's what I thought." Duo's voice and eyes became somber as they swept once more over the sector.

Wufei took a moment to follow Duo's new direction of thought; then he crossed his arms over his chest in a severe gesture that Trowa called 'form number one in the martial art of pig-headedness'.

"If you're thinking about the Breakers, don't. You are not responsible for that situation, and neither is Freeport."

"The Breakers are Freeport."

"What?"

Duo was fiddling with the end of his braid, looking as tired and gloomy as Wufei had ever seen him. "I still don't know who they are for sure...but I can feel them now. I can feel them moving around in the streets of Kropotkin and Goldman, I can feel them talking to people and winning them over. I know what they are. These guys are not gunrunners or mercenaries. That's...what makes it a bit hard for me. I think, before we're done, I'll be destroying people I like and respect."

Wufei didn't say anything. Was that why Duo had become withdrawn these past few weeks? Why he'd not told Wufei that the men they were looking for lived in Kropotkin? Had he been silent so long because he was hoping, against growing evidence, that he was wrong?

"These guys are the pillars of Freeport, and I don't know exactly what they're doing or why they're doing it, but they really, really believe in it. They think they're doing the right thing; like we were, when we fell to Earth five years ago. They'll defend that conviction to the end. This is the kinda guy who built Freeport. They're its heart and core."

Wufei's arms tightened across his chest, in stubborn resolve, and also because he was starting to shiver hard enough to make his knees quake. "No, they're not," he said. "Or the Troll King wouldn't have called them Breakers."

Wufei turned his head and met Duo's startled look.

"They broke the law," Wufei explained, not that he felt he had to; it was pretty obvious. "Freeport has its own way of doing things, a set of rules and codes that hold it together, and they violated that. I don't care how much they contributed to it in the past, they're on the wrong side now."

Duo started to laugh, it sounded more tired than manic, but a touch of warmth in it at last. "Wufei, you're amazing. Even here, you're gonna find the thin blue line between law and chaos, between right and wrong."

If I found that line in Freeport, it's because you showed it to me, Wufei thought. But he didn't say anything; he only sniffed in the put-upon way of a warrior being mocked by a brat. It's what Duo would expect.

"Must be nice to see everything like that," Duo added, still chuckling, eyes sad.

"Must be horrible not to."
"...Yeah."

"That bastard who attacked us earlier; I know why his words hurt you that much. But before you start getting depressed-"

"I don't get depre-"

"-and lashing out at your friends-"

Duo winced.

"-before you do that, ask yourself why you're going to destroy the Breakers."

Duo was silent for awhile.

"As you said, they broke the rules," he finally said softly, with a self-mocking grin. "I know Freeport's not supposed to have any...but, well, as you said, I guess we do after all."

"Right. I have a very old-fashioned view of justice. It doesn't always happen in a court of law. As your Doctor said, tyrants - and all criminals - create the weapons of their own destruction."

"Yeah. But in this case, the rest of Freeport will go down with them. I told you, they built this place, they're its heart-"

"Freeport's going to suffer. Neither of us is stupid enough to believe this is going to happen without some pain. But the Breakers won't destroy it and neither will you."

Duo looked down at the street again, jaw clenching.

"How can you know that for sure?" he finally asked.

"Because Freeport is like you, Maxwell; it's tougher than a roach. It might take a beating. It might change a bit. But it's endured this far, not because it's been molded by laws and a government, but because it's evolved under pressure. There's a lot of power of adaptation in that. Don't worry," Wufei concluded with a morose sigh. "There will always be a Freeport in space, driving people like me completely crazy."

"That'd be cool," Duo said with a wistful chuckle.

"You don't believe me."

"...It's very, very easy to destroy things. Even when you try to—even when you try to be careful and save them, it just takes—so little for them to burn down."

Wufei took a deep breath and let it out slowly. It frosted faintly in the half-light.

"Do you want to stop?" he asked, his voice practical.

Duo looked at him curiously. "Would you arrest me if I did?"

"What?! No, you moron." Wufei glared at him, then his thoughts turned inward. "We can remove you from the equation. Your assistance has been invaluable up till now, but if we had to, we could change our tactics. Think about this logically. From what you say, the Breakers are not an immediate danger to Freeport. So if we can draw their fangs on the Outside, we can cut down on their damage until they make a mistake. To start with, I'll take considerable pleasure in kicking a bit more attention and courtesy out of those delinquent Preventers we've placed on the blockade. They will have to
show me that they deserve their badges! This is the time when we have to gain Freeport's trust, not its hostility; like that, when the Breakers trip up and reveal themselves, Freeport will turn on them and we won't have to intervene. If we put a watch on the blockade- I know who some of the Breakers are now, and I know how they operate. Trowa can formulate a strategy- he'll get Quatre back in to help us, I think the situation deserves it-

Duo had been looking at him with a warm smile, his eyes crinkled. "Stop burning your brain cells, pilot. I'm not quitting."

"But you said:"

"You might be able to stop them, buddy, but I'm not taking any chances. If I let the Breakers have their way, Freeport would be destroyed one way or the other. If it becomes the base of a new military order, well, it wouldn't be Freeport any more, right? I won't let that happen. I'd rather set the match myself."

"But..."

The objection died in Wufei's throat. Duo was looking at him in a way that was...warm, intense, and actually a bit embarrassing to someone like Wufei who never showed his feelings if he could help it.

Duo said softly: "I'm just glad, you know...that you're standing with- Jesus, aren't you cold?!

Wufei blinked and looked down at himself. It wasn't that he'd forgotten he'd gone from a warm bed to this cold roof in only sweatpants and a t-shirt with a few holes in it, it was just that it has been of secondary importance up until now.

"Merciful Saints! Are you insane? Go back inside! You must be freezing your ass off! You do know it's like five degrees centigrade out here?!

"I'm okay," Wufei growled, while the way his fingers were gripping his shivering arms were calling him a liar. He didn't turn to leave though, he continued to stare at the streets below. A part of him didn't want to go down, even if he was, to be perfectly honest, about five minutes away from hypothermia.

Duo made an annoyed noise in his throat and took a step towards him. Wufei expected to be wrestled off the parapet - not a safe move by any standards, with six stories of empty air below their feet. Instead, Duo shrugged part of the leather coat off of one shoulder and draped the wing over Wufei's arms.


"This place is what's nuts."

Wufei could feel Duo's eyes on him; warm breath brushed his cheek. But Wufei didn't lift his eyes from the sector below.

"It's a madhouse. Hell, you have people dueling in the streets. It's unsafe. You break every industrial code and regulation I know of. I won't go into the working conditions, and I'd hate to see what the nuclear core looks like. It's cold, the air stinks, and I think the oxygen mix is off most of the time. But the people here have worked hard; they've shown their strength. They've earned the right to make their own choices. I won't bring in a peacekeeping force."

"I know, I know, I was pissed off when I said that," Duo sighed, absently rubbing Wufei's arm with
his warmer hand.

"I admit, I did think this place needed sanitizing at first. I thought it was a slave-pit and a pirate
hideout. But I have a better idea of how Freeport works now. And as much as I hate to admit it as a
Preventer, I think we need a place for misfits, rebels and outcasts. Especially now that humanity is
heading in a new direction where they may no longer be needed."

"Maybe..."

"Besides," Wufei added sourly, "if the Preventers tried to send in a task force, even under peaceful
conditions, Freeport would eat them alive."

Duo chuckled.

They were silent for awhile, watching the distant lights blink on and off. One of the cranes started
moving; a second later, a groan of metal sounded. Then the shuttle passed overhead and, close to the
ceiling as they were, Wufei feared they'd be shaken right off the building. Fuck, he felt sorry for the
neighbours on the higher stories. No wonder the ground floors were the most sought after...

After the echoes died, Duo said something. Wufei almost missed it, deafened as he was.

"I can't lie to you, Chang; it's about to get very dangerous. And I liked what you said about Freeport,
but you gotta realize, as much as we're trying to help the people here, we are now their enemies as
far as they'll see it."

"As far as I'm concerned, that was the case from the start," Wufei answered with a shrug. "I never
imagined they'd be happy with a Preventer in their midst. But I wish I could keep you out of this."

His arm was around Duo's waist; he hadn't been aware of the gesture. Now it seemed natural. There
was no weakness here, no distance; and the warmth of Duo's body was much appreciated. Duo
sighed and leaned into him companionably.

"I'm already in this up to my neck. 'Sides, I can't let the Breakers do this. I don't care what they're
fighting for in the end; what they did to Herb, to Josh, to the Trolls, that's just wrong. It doesn't
matter what their cause is. When innocent people die...Ah, I don't know how to say it. I...one of
these days, I'll tell you a story...how I got my last name. Some shit that happened to me when I was
young."

But not tonight. Wufei's own nerves still felt raw. They weren't used to sharing things like this, either
of them.

"So, what's our next move?" he asked, practical.

"I think we're going to drop by Alan Morgenstern's place. He's always pestering us to give him a
visit, so we will...but on our terms."

That had been the last thing Wufei had expected. Alan Morgenstern? The financier? Sure, he lived in
Kropotkin, but- he was one of the most respected men in Freeport. The man who'd helped build
Peacemillion.

"He's been nothing but nice and helpful to us," Wufei said slowly. His words were in no way an
objection to what Duo was implying; 'nice and helpful' were always suspicious to Wufei.

"Yeah, he's been real friendly, so he won't mind if we break into his place, right?" Duo grinned like
a wolf at the sleeping city beneath their feet.
"Erm, what exactly are you-"

"This is good." Duo interrupted him cheerfully, turning and hopping down from the parapet. "I hate it when life gets boring."
"For god's sake burn it down
Nothing ever burns down by itself
Every fire needs a little bit of help
Nothing ever burns down by itself
Every fire needs a little bit of help
Give the anarchist a cigarette
Burn baby burn, burn baby burn"
---Chumbawumba, 'Give the Anarchist a Cigarette'

As Duo casually strolled down the alley, Wufei couldn't stop himself from raising one last protest.

"Look, are you absolutely sure-"

"Yeah, I'm quite sure."

"Duo." Wufei caught him by the elbow and forced the smuggler to turn towards him. "I don't claim to know Freeport like you do, but even I realize that if this plan backfires, you'll find yourself isolated and maybe ostracized." Wufei glanced anxiously around the buildings of Kropotkin surrounding the alley. People were at their windows, chatting or hanging laundry, children were playing nearby...Wufei couldn't have felt more exposed if he'd had a neon sign with 'Preventer Spy' blinking on and off over his head.

"Actually, if I break into Morgenstern's place and it turns out I'm wrong about him, I'll find myself 'ostracized' right off the colony, or possibly 'ostracized' outta life too. But I'm not wrong." Duo said it quite simply, as if the possibility wasn't even worth discussing.

"But we've been following suspected Breakers-..." Wufei interrupted himself as he realized he was rehashing the same old argument again. They'd gone over this ground several times this past week, ever since Duo had told him of his suspicions regarding Morgenstern. Yes, the financier was somebody Wufei thought they should investigate in light of their findings to date, but they had no real proof of his link to the Breakers. None of the men they'd been following - not even Tor Kendle, supposedly one of the Breaker's lieutenants - had approached Morgenstern's house or workplace in the past weeks.

Duo glanced around, then leaned close and tapped Wufei's chin teasingly. "What's wrong, copper? You need the bloody fingerprints and the coroner's report?"

"Yes," Wufei growled, embarrassed by the affectionate grin directed at him.

"Well, this is Freeport, we ain't gonna get-"

"We could." Wufei glanced around and lowered his voice. "There is always evidence out there, even in Freeport. We've already narrowed the Breakers down to Kropotkin. We could continue to follow them until we prove - or disprove- a connection. We can wait until they make another mistake. With Braun's help, we could tap their comm lines, or-"

"You just can't trust my gut feelings?" Duo asked with a wide gesture of exasperation.

"I do trust your gut feelings," Wufei replied through gritted teeth. "I'm not entirely without intuition"
myself."

Truth be told, Morgenstern was a much more likely candidate for a Breaker than Ravachol, Mako and the other small-time crooks Wufei and Duo had encountered. The man was a politician, a financier, the kind of man the Breakers recruited. This was the sort of man who'd have the connections and the know-how to bribe a politician or Preventer high-up to get Wufei pulled off the case, and he'd be the kind to think of doing it that way in the first place; someone like Ravachol would have just organized a lynching party and gotten it over with.

A whole lot of little details were pointing towards Morgenstern's involvement. Carver didn't only kill terrorists and radical politicians on the Outside; he'd also hit some financial fraud types and others who might hurt Freeport or the Breakers in ways that Ravachol wouldn't even be aware of. Anyway, Morgenstern had been living in Kropotkin for too many years now. He knew everything that went on in the sector and he knew everybody. The Breakers would not be able to operate there without his knowledge. And Wufei had met the man. Morgenstern was idealistic, driven and ambitious. He would not let something like this go on in his sector without either opposing it or becoming fully involved.

In fact, considering Morgenstern's charisma, his leadership abilities, his control over Kropotkin, his past history as a rebel...There was a strong chance Morgenstern was rather high up the Breaker hierarchy. But they had no proof! Wufei's cop instincts rebelled against meting out justice when there was still a good chance they could be wrong. And for all Duo felt free to fight based solely on his intuition, Wufei was sure there were other people in Freeport who would like to have more evidence than that, even in this anarchist society.

"The problem with following a gut feeling is that your guts have very little impact on a raging mob," Wufei pointed out grimly.

"Aw, Chang, are you worried about me?"

Of course I am, you bastard, Wufei thought, striking away the hand that was trying to grope him.

"Look." Duo rolled his eye, absently rubbing the fingers Wufei had thwacked. "We're not going to march in and arrest him. We'll poke around and see what we find. Maybe we'll score that proof you're so keen on."

"Oh, in a manila folder with 'Secret Breaker Plans' written on it?"

"Sure, if he has one lying around. I was thinking his computer might be more useful."

"Neither of us is a hacker of Yuy's caliber. We won't have the time-"

"We went through all this last night. More than once." Duo sighed with a show of heavy patience. "I told you that this was reconnaissance and that you didn't need to come with me."

"Like hell I'm not coming with you."

"Sometime today then?" Duo turned and sauntered away.

Wufei glared at his back, but he followed, of course. Duo was the kind of man who gambled on his intuition and acted on it immediately. Wufei knew where Duo was coming from, but he wished his friend would be a bit more cautious. Wufei had a lot in his life to feel guilty over. The thought that Duo might become one of those regrets was haunting him...

They didn't talk about that revelatory moment on the roof last week. There was an unspoken
agreement that it wouldn't be brought up casually, but it was there, between them all the time. Wufei had the oddest feeling that in a way they were still up there, together in the darkness, every other person left far beneath them. The feeling was making him jumpy, off balance. Wufei had felt like a target since the very first day of his arrival in Freeport and it hadn't particularly bothered him, but now he'd dragged Duo into the bull's-eye.

But nothing was going to happen to Duo, because Wufei wouldn't let it. Duo was right, they had to move now against the Breakers; the lives of a lot of people, Duo’s included, rested on the outcome of their mission. But Duo was going to get out of this safe and sound if Wufei had anything to do with it.

The alley was long and winding, delineated by fences and walls of laundered sheets. Duo strolled along as if he didn't have a care in the world and just taking a shortcut to the avenue beyond. But he paused at one of the small yards in what appeared to be surprise.

"Hi fellas. You working on the drains?"

Three Outer Trolls looked up from where they'd been crouching over an opened sewage grid in the yard. They didn't answer. One of them slipped down into the narrow space alongside the sewer pipe without a further glance at them.

"Yeah," one of them finally answered stiffly. "We, er... got some reports of a problem..."

"Go," the third man hissed at them as his eyes swept the buildings around them once more.

Duo and Wufei had been discreetly examining the windows as well. Most people were at work, but there were always plenty of curious bystanders in Freeport. Time to take a gamble. Wufei fell into step with Duo as the latter walked over to the opened sewer line, then, after a last quick glance around, let himself down into it.

The space was very tight. Good thing neither of them was the brawny type. The big pipe next to them was tepid with the warmth of human refuse. It was sealed tight, no seepage of waste; there was only a heavy, throat-grabbing smell of mildew, dust and oil in the air, with a faint echo of sewer behind it all. Wufei crept forward, right on Duo's heels. Up ahead he could see the Outer Troll's hard hat.

Fifteen feet of narrow walkway gave way to a small junction, barely big enough for the three of them. The Troll was waiting for them with a flashlight. The man's shoulders and back were stooped. A heavy tool belt around his waist seemed to weigh him down. The only thing Wufei could see of his face, below the hard hat and above the red scarf, was a nest of fine lines in which his eyes, brown, wet and splotched with floating red veins, nestled like newly-laid eggs. He wasn't looking at either of them; his eyes wavered and circled their features without ever settling on their faces.

"The King gave me a message for you," he muttered in a deep, cracked voice. "He said that if I do this for you-"

"It settles our debt, yeah, yeah, I know," said Duo.

The Troll's brow scrunched beneath the hard hat and his eyes swept across Duo's face briefly.

"The King gave me a message for you," he mumbled again, as if repeating verbatim. "He said that if I do this for you, it will be a right mess for all of us if you're found out. So don't get found out."

"Oh. Hah, I'll do my best," Duo answered with a grin.
"Amos was a nice kid."

Amos? Ah, the Troll who'd been killed in Recyc during Carver's escape. One more of Carver's bodies.

"He gave me soup once," the Troll added intently, staring at Duo's right ear.

"Uh... that's nice."

"It had those crunchy things in it," the Troll added in a secretive whisper.

Wufei turned slowly to Duo and gave him a 'remind me why you thought this was such a bright idea, Maxwell?' look. Duo smiled sheepishly in the light of the torch.

"The King's message said that Fred here is the best Troll there is when it comes to going through the underbelly of Kropotkin," Duo told him, his eyes urging patience. "Right, Fred?"

"Croutons. That was what Amos called them. I been working these tunnels for fifteen years. Keeping the sewer lines watertight and shipshape."

"So you can lead us to where we need to go, right?" Duo prompted.

"Know every Troll tunnel beneath this sector. A lot of the maintenance tunnels too. But Amos was a good kid."

Apparently that was supposed to make some kind of sense and serve as an explanation, because the Troll abruptly turned around, hunched over in the tight space, his flashlight poking at the darkness ahead. He took one step and started mumbling. "Four straight, one left, four straight, one left, four straight- King said it was fourth Avenue and sixteenth Street. That's a nice place. I found a green bottle of fresh orange juice in the trash there once, and it still had some juice in it. That was good juice. But Amos gave me soup. And he always said 'Hi' when we met in the Temple."

Duo followed the muttered words without hesitation, and Wufei was forced to fall into step, trying to keep his sword from clunking into the pipes of electrical cords above. He was following a crazy old Troll down dark corridors into potentially hostile territory. This was just great. But that being said, most Trolls were crazy one way or another, and that didn't stop them from doing their job. The King obviously thought Fred was reliable enough to get them to their destination. And in Kropotkin, there really was no other way of breaking into the house of someone as well-known and respectable as Morgenstern without half the sector finding out and showing up with a couple of ropes.

The place was a maze. Wufei guessed that they were walking along one of the main sewer lines for the sector, but then Fred led them down an even narrower crawlspace which appeared to collect the waste from the block. Pipes from the individual buildings flowed into the main one at odd intervals and angles, with pumps and checkpoints and their attendant wires and lines adding to the confusion. The three men had to scramble under and over them as they progressed. At one point, they dropped down a level to crawl their way beneath the gridding itself, when the tangle of pipes became too much to get through.

Every block or so, Wufei estimated, the crawlspace was blocked by a locked grid. When Duo said the Trolls were paranoid about their territory, and allowed no non-Trolls access, he hadn't been exaggerating. Fred would haul out a huge keychain with hundreds of small electronic keys. They were indistinguishable one from the other, only the tiny chip at the end would differentiate them, but Fred would pick the right one without hesitation.

"Turn left here. I've never brought Unbelievers through here. The King told me to bring you.
Nobody goes where Trolls go. This is our territory. Only me, Quin, Reichert and Marla come through here. And Missou and the King, for inspections. But the King said it was okay to bring you. Just this once. I remember this junction. The pipes burst here three years ago. Some idiot screwed up in Waterworks. Put too much flow through. Three years ago, and ten months. The King said that idiot would not get near Waterworks again. I spent thirty hours straight here. Quin said I should leave to go and get the jab. But if I left, then the other pipes might back up, 'cause all the flow routed through them. That's no good."

Wufei noted the man spoke about the pipes like they were cherished pets that Fred raised and cared for. This is good, Wufei told himself, next time I think my job sucks, I'll remember Fred.

"Didn't get the jab after all. Didn't have the time. Came down with that lep-too-spiro-sas. I was all yellow. So was Quin. He said I had to leave to get the jab, but he didn't get it either. He stayed with me all the time. Quin's my best friend. But Amos was a nice kid too."

Fred frequently brushed the pipes with his free hand as he passed, as if he could gauge their state of being through his fingertips. He walked with a practiced slouch, bent at the knee, his sloped shoulders rounded to fit the narrow walkway. The ceaseless mutter filled up the little space that was left by the sewage line, the electrical cords, the junction control boxes and the metal grids on which they walked. Up ahead, roaches the size of credit-pieces skittered away from the beam of the torch.

"Remember when this flow equalizer caught fire. Some bastard had hacked into the landlines above. Was trying to run some big machinery. Overloaded the circuits. Big fire. Five years and seven months ago. Took us three weeks and two days to get in replacements for all the pieces."

Three feet ahead of Wufei, Duo paused, hoisted up his sleeve and wiped his forehead with a part of his wrist that had been covered until now. Wufei knew how he felt. Sweat was dribbling into his eyes, as the warmth of the sewage pipe and exertion took their toll, but Wufei's entire skin felt contaminated by the filth, the roaches and the ceaseless mutter.

"-went around carting wastes away in trucks, so that the pipes-shhh."

Fred stopped at one of the turns in the labyrinthine maze of crawlspace, corridors and junctions to peer through a grid of thick metal bars. He was mercifully silent for a couple of minutes, his head tilting back and forth to look at the corridor beyond, listening attentively. Wufei and Duo both fell into the absolute stillness of practiced infiltrators and waited.

"Leavin' the pipes here," Fred whispered as he glanced back at them. "Need to cross over."

He made it sound like they were going to creep through a no-man's-land complete with strafing gun turrets. But once Fred had opened the two reinforced locks and swung open the grid, it turned out to be a maintenance tunnel like the ones found beneath every sector. Fred hopped out and scurried along the tunnel like one of the roaches, looking uncomfortable without the presence of his beloved sewage pipes. Ah, of course. The maintenance tunnels were patrolled and used by the people of the sector; they were separate from the sewage tunnels which were the distinct property and territory of the Trolls.

Fred's mutter had resumed, higher pitched and visibly agitated.

"This part was flooded too, back in '94, when the tank on Sixth Avenue broke. Real bad, damaged the whole undercarriage of the sector. Washed out our tunnels too. We replaced fourteen junction boxes, two controller stations - watch your step, oil puddle. Not good, they should clean this up. The lighting's okay in here though. Kropotkin is much better than Vanzetti. I worked in Vanzetti when there was the outbreak of Blue Fever- here, this is where we get back to the pipes. This is Reichert's
section."

A jangle of keys. Fred quickly fitted the two separate keys into two separate locks, opened the grid and ducked in. With a nearly imperceptible sigh Duo followed, and so did Wufei after a last quick glance around.

"Fifth on the left. Fifth on the left. Then first right, and we're in under the building. Then I open the grid. Then the King said I do nothing. The King said I don't leave our tunnels. At all."

So they were near Morgenstern's building, Wufei deduced. And they could have reached it a whole lot faster and with considerably more comfort if they'd taken the maintenance tunnel from the start, instead of the blocks and blocks of cramped sewage lines. Wufei glared at Fred's back, but the man was obviously disturbed and would have been too nervous to lead them through the wider maintenance tunnels that weren't 'his domain'. They were at the Trolls' mercy here, and they had no choice regarding either the guide or the route taken.

"Right here. This is the block. There's the pipes from the forward unit. This line leads to the rear building. And this one is the garbage compactor for- this floor section has been cut. Maybe Reichert did some repairs under here. He never mentioned it."

"Fred, move it," Duo whispered at their guide who'd stopped to sweep his flashlight along the floor. "I need to inspect this. If there's a fault in the floor grids, there could be a fault in the infrastructure beneath, and we're near a junction-"

"Later. Look, lead us to the rear building, okay? And show us the exit. Then you can come back here and do your work."

Fred turned in the narrow space and glared at Duo's right shoulder. "Work must be done right away. There's only me, Quin, Marla and Reichert working this sector. We have to take care of it all. If we see something that might put the pipelines in danger-"

"Yeah, okay, but lead us to the exit first, okay?"

Fred's raw-egg stare grew more agitated, skipping from Duo's chest to Wufei's sword and back. "But the King said we should always check-"

"He also said to guide us to the exit," Duo interrupted, his voice growing a thin layer of steel. "You gonna disobey the King?"

Fred hesitated, nervously riffling the tools on his belt, his eyes darting from Duo's hands to the grid beneath them. "But it looks damaged," he muttered. "It could- Reichert never said- but Amos- the King said-"

He abruptly turned and shuffled away, fortunately in the right direction. Wufei followed, feeling the slight give of one of the floor grids as his weight bore down on it. Definitely damaged, and that did nothing for his faint claustrophobia as he imagined some kind of accident in these tunnels, stuck with no way out, listening to Fred's mutterings until they all died of thirst or- steady, Chang.

Fred's mutter was more like a growl now, and it had dropped to where Wufei couldn't distinguish the words, which somehow didn't make it any better. He occasionally caught the name 'Reichert', and the words 'floor', 'pipes' and 'repair'. He wondered if the inhabitants of Kropotkin knew of the muttering mole-man who paced the tunnels beneath their feet, caring ceaselessly for the disposal of their wastes and filth, and eventually their bodies...Like the vacuum of space around them, it probably didn't bear thinking about too much, or you might lose it.
Finally they arrived at another junction, and Fred reached up to unlock a hatchway of crossed bars in the ceiling. The metal swung down in silence, its bars forming the rungs of a crude ladder to climb.

"Wait for us here. Or at that broken place back there, if you got to. But don't go any further," Duo whispered.

Fred nodded sullenly, his eyes on Duo's boots, his scowl obvious despite the hard hat and the red scarf.

They emerged into darkness. Wufei blinked, trying to adapt to the absence of Fred's wandering torch. A glimmer made him glance to one side, where he saw Duo's lighted watchface float like a will o’ the wisp.

"We got three hours or more before the workers in this sector finish their shift. Fortunately those financial freaks work very long days. We should be well clear of the building by the time any of them start to come back."

They were in the building's furnace room, Wufei discovered, finally able to make out the lumps and shadows around them. A thin rod of grey light crept beneath a nearby door, showing them the exit.

Time to take yet another gamble. Wufei listened attentively at the basement door, and then twitched his hand in a 'move' gesture. Duo ghosted by him, and cracked the lock on the door with ease. In the faint wash of light from the hallway outside, Wufei noticed the twisted grin on Duo's face; he looked like he was having fun, Wufei thought grumpily.

They met no-one in the hallways up to Morgenstern's. The financier lived alone in a small bachelor pad near the top of a building right behind the hangar which housed the trading floor. Because it was a nerve centre of Freeport, the entrances and exits were watched by volunteers, and busy streets surrounded them at all sides. This was the best way Duo had devised of getting into Morgenstern's place while the financier was away, and the plan was far from perfect. They could run into the wives or husbands of the people working on the trading floor at any time.

Wufei stood next to Duo, shielding him from a casual glance from the stairwell nearby, his ears pricked and nerves humming while Duo checked every millimeter of Morgenstern's door for alarm and traps. Then it took a few more minutes to disable the one he found. Seconds ticked by like the timer on a bomb. If someone came out of one of the doors nearby, Wufei wondered if they could pretend to be here to fix the doorbell...

"Got the bitch. Good security," Duo breathed, attacking the lock on the door proper, which eventually opened with the gentlest of clicks.

They eased into the apartment, and then spent a tense half hour prudently going over every foot of the place looking for more alarms that could betray them. The two tiny rooms were completely unremarkable, the furniture revealed by Duo's flashlight beam was sparse and worn. Morgenstern obviously believed in living as simply as anarchy and Freeport's necessities dictated. No wonder he'd invited Duo and Wufei to the communal cafeteria to eat and chat, a few weeks before.

Wufei thought back on those conversations as he examined a series of framed photographs on the wall and memorized the faces. The financier had been so enthusiastic about Freeport and anarchy. If he was being guarded around Wufei, it wasn't obvious at all. If he was a Breaker and knew Wufei was a Preventer, why had Morgenstern invited him over repeatedly, and talked like a revolutionary? To keep tabs on him... ? Doubt was prickling up and down Wufei's spine as he stared around the barren room. Not even a weapon in sight. The lack of manila folders with 'Secret Breaker Plans' on it was conspicuous.
Duo had leafed through a few papers on the crude metal desk pushed into one corner, but he'd not spent much time on it. He'd settled at the computer almost immediately and was busy typing away.

"Any luck?" Wufei whispered, leaning over Duo's shoulder.

"Absolutely none at all!" Duo exclaimed with obvious satisfaction.

Wufei gave him a probing look.

"I know the guy who installs most of this sector's computers, I know all his backdoors and his tricks, and in this computer they've all been blocked. The security's been beefed up, and there's some com line scrambler on the hub here that I've never seen before. I can't even get into the cache," Duo announced with a wide grin.

Wufei continued to give him a probing look.

"This isn't usual security," Duo finally explained. "Not by a long stretch. People guard against online intrusions and attacks, but they don't normally turn their home computer into an electronic bunker. It's as good as the manila folder you were looking for."

"The man controls Freeport's finances," Wufei countered. "He probably takes work home with him. He'd protect it as much as he could."

"He doesn't bring stuff home with him; Morgenstern does the business, but the info and the system on the trade floor belong to Freeport. I know it looks like they work in a shed with recycled computers wired together with string and paperclips, but in fact the system has more security than all the banks in the Space Sphere combined, and it's completely locked, hermetically sealed both physically and online. You can't download stuff or ftp or even remove a hard disk without the deadswitch turning it into a heap of spare parts. This is Freeport, remember? We don't do blind trust; paranoia is a much safer bet. You know how much Marsico and those other shipbuilders would pay to get our data?"

"So you think he's got information on the Breakers on his computer?"

"He's got something he doesn't want people to see on his computer, and some pretty nifty security. I think even Heero wouldn't have hacked this baby from outside this room."

"How are we going to hack it then?" Wufei asked with heavy patience.

"We may not be able to- wait a sec. Hah, they always forget that one."

"What?" Wufei asked, watching command lines scroll down on the screen.

"Did I mention I know the guy who sets up most of Freeport's systems? Morgenstern's built on that; he's added tons of security and disabled all the backdoors, but he forgot command line access."

"That won't allow you to hack into anything. You said even the cache was protected."

"But not basic commands like the backup routine." Duo grinned and whipped out a chip which he inserted into the drive. "As long as he didn't protect his drive- no, looks like he missed that one too. Most of the security is set up to keep people from outside hacking in via the com line, he's not completely fireproof against direct access."

"So?"
"So I'll do what every responsible computer owner should do on a regular basis," said Duo with a virtuous expression, running the appropriate command. "I'll back up Mr. Morgenstern's computer for him."

"Onto your disk." Wufei's eyes flickered towards the chip Duo had inserted.

"Exactly. Wouldn't want to lose this information in a crash now, would we?"

"But the information you're backing up will still be completely locked-"

"Yes, but once we're at home, I can install it on an instance on my laptop, and then spend three days cracking it if I need to. Heero left me all kinds of very, very nice and completely illegal tools." The disk drive was humming as it wrote the information down on the chip.

"Better than nothing, I guess," Wufei sighed. If Morgenstern was guilty of anything other than being paranoid about his personal information, and if he kept incriminating information on his computer, and if Duo could hack into it in a reasonable time frame...they might actually get somewhere. Wufei wasn't sure it was worth the risk they'd taken, but they had been getting nowhere fast before anyway.

Wufei went to listen at the door. They still had some time before the traders started returning, and all was silent in the building around them. Then he went to leaf through the papers on the desk a bit more thoroughly.

"We're leaving," said Duo tersely, shoving back the chair and hitting the eject button on the drive.

Wufei glanced up in surprise. "What's up?"

"Dunno. The hub's com line indicator started flickering like mad. Maybe he's just getting a really big mail."

So why are you worried? Wufei wondered, putting his ear to the door. He made a 'Silence!' gesture as he heard footsteps. His instincts were beginning to prickle. If they'd tripped an alarm, someone would be at the door by now. Yes, but something was wrong anyway. He had no proof of it, but he could feel it.

The footsteps passed the door; two kids, one older, one whiny younger one. They squabbled all the way to the stairwell and started climbing. Wufei was going to let them get a good headway, but Duo was already opening the door silently. He shook off Wufei's cautionary hand on his sleeve, and mouthed 'no time' in the dim light of the hallway.

They locked the door and Duo set the security back on, then they made their way back to the basement as cautiously as they could. Wufei's instincts were still prickling, but there were no running footsteps in the silent hallways around them, no alarms, nobody coming to investigate... Duo walked swiftly to the hatchway down to the sewer system and jumped, landing on the grid below with barely a murmur of stressed metal. Wufei followed him, closing the hatch behind them. Hopefully they'd erased all traces of their passage. Damn it, they should have taken longer to extract, been more careful.

"Fred?" Duo hissed, his flashlight darting around them.

"He's probably at that broken floor grid," Wufei muttered.

They stared at each other in the light reflected off grids and sewer lines.

"Fuck!" Duo plunged into the nearby tunnel. Wufei followed as quickly as he could, his instincts
now screaming at him. They'd overlooked something. They'd made a mistake!

The loose floor section had been removed. It was stuck up against one side of the wall. The small space underneath was clear of dust and old oil stains, unlike all the other places they'd seen till now. Wufei cursed himself as he remembered how the hatchway to Morgenstern's basement had opened without a creak, how the door to the furnace room had appeared to have been recently oiled - damn it!

"Right under our noses," Duo whispered bitterly, his flashlight pointing straight up so that only the echoes of its light illuminated the hole in the bottom of the sewer lines; a carefully concealed trapdoor where there shouldn't be any, going from the Troll's sewer lines to the undercarriage of the sector. The space below was dark, a metal ladder welded to one side leading down and down and down. There were no signs of Fred.

"We should have realized. Best way to keep a thing like the Breakers secret is to not meet where anybody in Freeport can see you. Down in the undersector, using tunnels most people can't access... yeah, that'll do it." Duo was glaring down at the black hole of the open trap door.

"But thousands of people work down in the undersector," Wufei whispered, trying to keep his voice from echoing in the Troll tunnels.

"Not right down there, if we are where I think we are. We're near the section with the broken spoke of the colony. Happened twenty years ago, but it put stress on the outer hull, and it was too big a job to fix properly. There are still damaged areas down there where people don't bother to go. It's not livable room, and we have cargo space elsewhere. If the Breakers are smart, they'll have cordoned off some storage area. A few rooms, hangars, an old escape hatch out to space they'll have repaired, electricity stolen from Kropotkin above them...And all that inaccessible from the undersector, where people might wonder why Kropotkin financiers are strolling around the haulage crates. No, all access will be from up here and through other maintenance tunnels."

Wufei fingered the hilt of his sword. "Who did Fred say was the Troll in charge of this sector?"

"Reichert," Duo bit out. "And I know what you're thinking. Reichert has to be in on it. No way a Troll wouldn't know about a brand new hatch appearing in a tunnel in his sector. You saw how Fred reacted."

"The Breakers must have bribed him to keep quiet about this, and to let them-"

"Nobody bribes a Troll. But if their arguments were good enough, he'll have joined them. The King is going to crucify him."

Wufei stared down into the darkness. "Do you think this Reichert would have heard we were coming today?"

"Fred knew, the other two Trolls outside knew...this traitor might have heard about it. But remember the way the Breakers broke into Recyc? They probably had Reichert's help there too. If the King has any common sense, he'll have realized he might have a leak, and taken steps to keep our visit a secret."

They stared down at the hole. This could very well be a trap, and all they had to rely on was the common sense of a man who'd dubbed himself the 'Troll King'.

"He's also extremely paranoid," Duo added reassuringly.

Wufei didn't answer. The darkness around them seemed to grow inky black.
They both knew they were going down there, though. They weren't going to leave Fred at the mercy of the Breakers. Wufei, remembering Josh and Herb, just hoped it wasn't too late. If they were lucky, Fred was still down there and unharmed, investigating this strange underground construct that was parasitizing his beloved Troll tunnels. If they were lucky, Wufei and Duo would find him before the Breakers did. If they were really lucky, they'd all get out of there with no criminal the wiser.

Wufei wasn't feeling lucky.

"Let's go. I'll take point, you cover my back," Duo whispered.

Wufei wanted to protest, but Duo had already let himself swing through the hole. There was barely a whisper of metal from below as the light-footed smuggler started climbing down the ladder.

Wufei unsheathed his sword and followed.

"You hit him too hard, now we'll have to carry him," the man said, then made a strangled choking sound when Wufei's fist slammed into his temple.

His colleague shot to his feet from where he'd been kneeling besides Fred's limp body. He fell just as quickly when Duo slammed his elbow into the back of his neck.

"Looks like we're in luck," Wufei whispered, glancing around. "It doesn't sound like they had time to raise the alarm. Is he alive?"

"Hmyeah, looks a bit confused though," Duo said, checking Fred's pupils by the beam of his flashlight.

"Nothing's changed then," Wufei grumbled. Fred was starting to groan and stir.

Wufei glanced around, looking for more Breakers. The ladder had led them down into what looked like a typical section of the undersector, badly lit by a few red emergency lights, some of them broken. It was a labyrinth of huge containers, five times the height of a man, the kind that were sealed up and pulled through space by tugs from colony to colony to deliver goods. But unlike the undercarriage beneath other sectors, the containers here were empty, and many were damaged, their metal crumpled or their sides torn off. It seemed this area had become a graveyard of haulage units. From the thick dust that lay on the containers, these had been here for ages; but that same dust on the ground was crisscrossed with fresh tracks.

Wufei's instincts told him they'd been right, they'd stumbled upon the Breakers headquarters. This would be the place where they hid people like Carver from the rest of Freeport, and got together to plot whatever it was they thought they were doing in the Space Sphere. No wonder Duo and Wufei had been unable to find any trace of Carver, or see Tor Kendle meet up with members of his organization.

But if Breakers had cordoned off this sector for their own use, unknown to the rest of inquisitive Freeport...that spoke of a high degree of organization, of a mole in the Civil Planning department, and perhaps the complicity of an Elder or Two...

They'd found Fred by following his shuffling footsteps in the dust, until they'd rejoined a path between containers that had many traces of movement in it. Trust Fred to wander right into a Breaker thoroughfare. Neither of the two ex-Pilots had been very surprised to find that Fred hadn't escaped


"How are we going to get back up?" Wufei asked, crouching to check the men they'd knocked out. They'd be unconscious for a few minutes, hopefully incapacitated for longer and unable to raise the alarm right away. That should be enough; he wasn't like Carver, to kill them in cold blood for expediency. "We can't take Fred back up the ladder. And it'd be suicidal to wander around a compound full of Breakers."

"There won't be that many Breakers down here," Duo answered, absently wiping away some blood from a cut on Fred's forehead with a rag from the Troll's pocket. Fred was moaning and blinking blearily. "These bastards are shamming as ordinary citizens - hell, I guess they are ordinary citizens in a way. That means they have twenty-five hour workdays same as the rest of us. They don't spend all their time hanging around down here. There'll be a few on patrol - like these two - and maybe a half a dozen in case of trouble."

"Unless they're just happening to have a big meeting today, in which case they're all here."

"Our two glasses are always gonna be half-full and half-empty, huh?" Duo chuckled, smile inappropriately warm and affectionate. "I hear all couples have an optimist and a pess-"

"Duo!" Wufei hissed furiously, feelings his face heat up despite the biting cold. This wasn't the time to be talking about- and besides, Fred was staring at them with glassy eyes coming into focus.

"I c'n...get us out..."

Wufei and Duo turned to stare at Fred, who must be a good deal more awake than they'd thought. The glassy, unfocused gaze was his natural state, Wufei remembered.

Duo gave Wufei an unnecessary warning look to keep quiet from now on. A Blade could talk to his Handler with others present, particularly in cases of emergency, but it would be best to avoid it.

"How can we get out, Fred?" he asked, wiping away a new trickle of blood. Fred was shuddering, either from cold or from shock. He would never be able to climb up several stories of ladder to the upper sector and then make his way through miles of tunnels.

"... recognize this area..." Fred mumbled, staring at Duo's right shoulder. "Worked here a few years back. When we were trying to get this part of the sector functional again. Then they- some guys - communal decision- somebody decided we shouldn't bother."

"How long ago was that?" Duo asked sharply, to Wufei's relief since he'd been dying to ask the same question.

Fred just looked confused. "I...six...years?...No...I..."

"That's okay, Fred, tell us later," Duo sighed, tying the bloodied rag around Fred's head to staunch the bleeding. Wufei leaned over Duo's shoulder to examine the dilated pupils and hoped Fred didn't have something seriously wrong with his already scrambled brains.

"Just tell us how to get out of here," Duo added.

"Tunnels." Fred's voice immediately became firmer as he went back to familiar grounds.

"There's Troll tunnels in the undersector?" Duo asked, visibly puzzled. "I thought garbage down here was just pumped up the lines to-"
"Emergency hatches. In case of flooding and breaches in the upper levels."

"But that'll just be a door with a long ladder leading up. I don't think you can climb far-"

"Emergency airlock."

Duo suddenly nodded. "Who has the override code?"

"The King. Only the King."

"Excellent. Do you remember where it is?"

For answer, Fred grabbed Duo's shoulder and tried to scramble up.

Wufei and Duo helped the Troll to his feet and the man lead them off through the rows of containers as if he had homing instinct for his beloved tunnels. Wufei supposed they were heading towards the sector wall, dimly visible over the stacks and rows of containers a dozen yards ahead. If Wufei had understood correctly, there would be an emergency escape route inserted into the wall, for Trolls who were stuck in the tunnels of Kropotkin during an amber emergency like a hull breach. That meant an airlock, and only the King could open it once triggered. Duo and Wufei could leave Fred at the bottom of the ladder, safe from the Breakers, and go get help. Yes, this plan could work. It was almost enough to turn one into an optimist.

Then they heard a soft noise in the darkness behind them.

Wufei and Duo exchanged a grim look. Wufei had always found pessimism easy to rely on, and it rarely let him down.

"Fred?" Duo asked very softly. "How far is-"

"Not far." Fred's face was white beneath the grime, he was sweating, jaw clenched and eyes gleaming in panic, but he was tugging Duo confidently towards the left, around a container that looked like it had exploded under vacuum. Wufei hoped Fred did indeed have some mysterious homing instinct for sewer tunnels, because this labyrinth of wrecks might have changed in the six-or-whatever years since the half-crazy Troll had been here.

Behind them, they could hear the occasional discreet shuffle of footsteps. Too discreet. If these were Breakers looking for their two missing friends, they'd be shouting. No, this was much more serious.

Wufei and Duo didn't need to say anything, not wanting to alarm Fred any further, but they both knew the score. They both remembered the way Morgenstern's com line had started to flicker while they were in his apartment. The two Breakers who'd found Fred might have been a patrol who'd run into him by coincidence, but before that, maybe as soon as he'd broken open the hatch, Fred must have triggered an alarm. The Breakers knew there were intruders down here, and they were all coming to silence them.

Duo hauled Fred forward at a fast pace. Wufei fell back three steps, sword drawn. They hobbled through the Breaker realm, Duo grimly supporting a taller, heavier Fred.

Wufei could feel them gather in the darkness behind them, it felt/sounded like dozens of people. They knew the intruders were here, and more than that, they sounded remarkably organized for a group that should have been caught by the alarm unprepared.

"Hey- they're here!" somebody behind Wufei shouted.
Wufei spun around. Four men had turned a corner Wufei and Duo had just passed. They looked ready for a fight.

"Go!" Wufei snapped, stepping between Duo and the Breakers with swords and cudgels already unsheathed and ready. Behind his back, Duo swore and shoved Fred. The Troll stumbled forward with a whiny of panicked fear at the sight of the weapons.

The four Breakers hesitated for an instant, maybe waiting for more of their friends to join them. Then they must have realized they were only facing two puny-looking guys and a wounded Troll. They attacked a second later.

Four against one were not Wufei's favorite odds. He ducked beneath a blow and threw himself past his attacker, trying to corner one of the others against a nearby container.

A quick swipe of his blade across an exposed wrist. A big dagger hit the floor and the man grasped his arm in pain. Wufei dodged around him, using him as a shield, and attacked the second and third man trying to get around their friend.

No time to play around. Wufei slashed at one man's throat, swung his weight on one leg and kicked back, high up and hard, at a third man, catching him in the jaw. By the time he turned around, the fourth man had run off. He ignored the injured Breaker who was huddled on the floor and clutching his wrist, and ran after Duo, trying to spot his friend and Fred in the badly-lit labyrinth.

"We're here! Come on!" Duo shouted a few dozen yards away. There was a gap between two walls of solid metal containers; it led towards the sector wall. Duo's voice had come from there.

Wufei sprinted towards the gap, relief flooding him. Looked like they were going to make it. He could hear running footsteps behind him as their attackers started to charge the intruders, but the Breakers were too late. Duo had switched on his flashlight to illuminate the emergency hatch and guide Wufei towards it. Wufei ran between piles of tarpaulin-covered crates and broken containers towards that faint, flickering promise of escape.

A stack of boxes had been shoved aside and knocked over, one of them spilling repairman's tools on the floor, to reveal the Troll's emergency hatch. Odds were, the Breakers hadn't realized it was there, or hadn't considered it might be used outside of the event of a hull breach. Wufei was a dozen yards away.

Duo's flashlight painted the scene in black and white. Duo was standing near an open airlock, waiting for him...But Fred was behind Duo, sticking a key from his belt into a dusty, grimy console, a grimace of fear and pain on his face as he stared out at the darkness behind Wufei.

Duo, sensing something wrong, twisted around.

"Fred! NO! Wufei's not-"

Duo threw himself at the Troll to stop him from turning the key. Wufei was only ten feet away. He saw Duo reach Fred-

The Troll's eyes were full of blind panic as he triggered the hatch.

The airlock beeped once in warning and slammed shut just as Wufei reached it.
Wufei tried to move, but he felt constricted. Something was holding him down. He must be in Space. Strapped into Nataku. Adrift.

"Wake him up."

He was in darkness and it felt so cold...Could his Gundam be breached? Heat and air leaking out-

"Get him screaming. That'll get the other one to come out."

Wufei felt a frown cross his face, but the sensation was distant, as if his body was a hundred feet away. What...? Who was speaking...?

"Yeah, that'll do it." There was an ugly chuckle.

I'm dreaming, Wufei realized. One more dark dream of the war, of Nataku. Dreaming of OZ guards on the Lunar base. He was asleep, and that meant he must be...in Freeport? Yes, he was in Freeport, asleep with Duo besides him.

He rather wanted to wake up now.

"Not the face," someone said sharply.

A noise, a sharp hiss like gas whistling from a pipe.

Alarm prickled over Wufei's skin. He couldn't move his arms, he wasn't asleep, he-

Pain! Burning! The smell! Scorched skin-

Wufei bucked, breath whistling through his teeth as he tried to throw himself to the ground and roll. Napalm!

"Whoa!"

"Hey, don't let him go!"

Burning! Pain and stink of seared flesh and-

"Fuck!"

Had to put it out putitout putitout-

"What the-"

"Can't- hold him-"
Something slammed into Wufei's head. It knocked him to the floor. His eyes flew open, though all he could see were sparks. But he'd regained enough wits to realize the burning sensation was fading, and it was nothing compared to the pain that had ripped him apart when he'd been attacked with napalm. What the- where the hell was he?!

"I said, don't hit him in the face! Please!"

Please? Who said please to that kind of request? It was someone speaking from some distance away. The man who'd just punched Wufei was standing right above him. That one hadn't said anything, he'd let his fist do the talking. Wufei blinked, and his attacker slowly came into focus through the fading sparks and the strands of his hair fallen over his eyes.

Carver. Damn.

Hands grasped his arms and hauled him up, onto his knees. They'd been holding him before, he could still feel their grip on his skin, but he'd jerked free under the goading of pain and the flashback. What the hell had burned him-...?

There was a welding torch in Carver's left hand. That answered that question.

"At least he's awake now. Hold him better," a patrician voice ordered in the background.

A man right behind Wufei called the Preventer a motherfucking pig in a harsh whisper while getting a tighter, more painful grip on his arm. Wufei's whole body was hurting, particularly his head and a single burning spot near his neck where the welding torch had presumably made contact.

"Maxwell!"

Wufei whipped his head around, staring past Carver and the threat of the torch.

They were in the maintenance tunnels. No longer in the Troll pipes, no longer in the undersector. Were they back in Kropotkin? What the hell had happened? The last thing he could remember was Fred, slamming the airlock shut two seconds before Wufei could reach it. After that, his memory was a huge, dark prickle of pain.

Armed men and women were scattered around him and his captors. Wufei spotted Ferret near a hatch; he'd been the one to shout. As Wufei watched, dazed, Ferret drew another breath.

"Maxwell, I know you can hear me! You don't want us to go to town on your buddy here, do you? Come out and bring the Troll with you."

Wufei started to struggle against the people holding him. Duo? He was nearby?

Fragmented recollections were coming back to him, fighting their way past the darkness and the pain in his skull. He'd been down in the undersector, in an area full of damaged containers lying around like bodies in a morgue. The Breakers' headquarters. Wufei and Duo and Fred, the Troll, had been running from the Breakers.

Fred had closed the emergency airlock. Duo had been on the right side. Wufei hadn't.

And then...Wufei shook his head savagely, trying to clear it. He almost passed out again.

He couldn't remember much of what happened next. Only snatches of fighting. Blood. A lot of it. The face of a stranger staring up at him as Wufei jerked his sword out of the man's belly. And then nothing.
He’d gotten himself captured, that much was obvious. His head was aching and his ears ringing. It felt like he had a cut on the leg and bruises all over. To top it off, his muscles were clenching and trembling on his right side. Either he was seriously concussed and having a seizure – a distinct possibility – or they’d used a tazer on him at some point.

"Maybe you'll change your mind when you hear your girlfriend squealing," Ferret laughed, greasy, loud and vicious. He turned towards Carver and nodded, not that Carver was looking at him.

Carver grabbed Wufei's chin and tilted his head up. Wufei stared at the hard features and the brown eyes, curiously blank and unemotional, coldly examining Wufei and judging the best way to break him. They held no particular animosity; just a cold, clear determination. Wufei suddenly realized he'd never heard Carver's voice. Maybe he was mute. Maybe he just didn't need to speak when his job was to hurt and kill.

"Remember, don't damage his face. He needs to be recognizable."

The man who'd been speaking finally came into view over Carver's shoulder. Morgenstern. It wasn't a massive surprise. Not as good as a manila folder with 'Secret Breaker Plans' on it, as far as compromising the financier went, but it was pretty damning anyway.

Morgenstern was looking down at Wufei with a curious mixture of resolve and regret. "Do it," he sighed. The men holding Wufei laughed, the small, ugly laughter of cowards looking forward to seeing pain applied to somebody else.

Carver let go of Wufei's chin and grabbed the collar of his shirt. In his other hand, the torch's pilot ignited a small but steady burst of flame, hissing softly, a dreadful promise of pain. Wufei discreetly tested the hold of his guards, to no avail. They'd stripped him of his jacket, and of his sword not surprisingly. Damn it, if he was going to die, he really wanted his sword at hand...

Carver ripped Wufei's shirt open with a single vicious tug.

There was a sudden silence in the small circle around the Preventer. Ferret stumbled forward to get a better look over Carver's shoulder. Morgenstern's eyebrows had shot upwards.

"Ho-lee fuck! Looks like someone's done him already!" Ferret said, staring at the burn scars twisting their way across Wufei's skin.

One of the men holding him loosened his grasp to lean forward and get a better look. Wufei concentrated his chi and tore his arm away. He struck, clean, quick and vicious at the man's jaw and ripped a dagger from the Breaker's belt as he fell. Then he slashed at Carver. If he could just get him- They could kill Wufei afterwards, but he was going to get Carver one way or another.

Carver blocked the blow, catching Wufei's wrist. Wufei put his body weight behind it, tried to force the knife forward, but Carver held him down with ease, and the other Breaker, after a cry of alarm, was bearing down on Wufei from behind.

"Hold him!" Morgenstern snapped, taking a few cautious steps back.

Wufei struggled against Carver's grip. Carver held his wrist, staring down at him. Deep, deep in his eyes, a dark light flickered, a small hint of cruel interest.

Finally the knife fell to the floor as Wufei's strength gave out.

"Good," Morgenstern muttered, coming up behind Carver again. He gestured at another man nearby. "You, help Sam, make sure he's not too badly injured. Get him topside."
Somebody picked up the unconscious man Wufei had punched. Morgenstern watched the man's assisted exit with a worried frown, then nudged Carver on the shoulder. "Get started. We have to get that Troll. Albert, any news from the search crews yet?"

"Yeah, they called in to report five minutes ago," said Ferret, still staring in sick fascination at Wufei's chest. "No trace of Maxwell."

"I don't really care about Maxwell," Morgenstern said. "He can't do us much harm now. It's the Troll I need. We have to block any move the King makes against us when he realizes one of his men is mixed up in this mess."

Fred. They wanted Fred as hostage. But why? The Breakers' cover was all but blown now, surely. Having a single Troll hostage would not make a difference. And Duo was very dangerous to them, how could they discount someone of Duo Maxwell's influence so easily...? Wufei licked his lips and tried to concentrate on the situation, but the hiss and stink of the welding torch was eating away at his concentration. They were going to torture him so that Duo would give himself up. It would be foolish for Duo to surrender when they might just kill him as soon as they had Fred, but that would probably not stop Duo from either handing himself over or trying something desperate. Wufei knew he would do the same if the positions were reversed and Duo were the one being slowly burned to death. Unfortunately, Wufei couldn't think of anything he could do at this juncture to stop the inevitable.

Morgenstern walked towards the hatch, an access to the sewer lines. No wonder they hadn't found Duo and Fred yet, if the latter had recovered enough to lead Duo through the Troll kingdom. The Breakers might have a Troll of their own on their side, but Fred was surely in a class by himself.

"Duo." Morgenstern's voice was loud but still so reasonable. "I know you can hear me. You're not the kind to leave a man behind. You're nearby. This is about to get very unpleasant. I have no desire to do this to someone who once fought for the freedom of Space. I wish I could have convinced you and Chang to consider... but I guess you'd both already made your decision. And it's too late I'm afraid. But I don't want to hurt him like this if I can help it. Please surrender with the Troll, and I promise you that we won't kill either of you." Wufei noted Morgenstern hadn't promised not to kill him.

There was nothing but silence from the tunnel. It was a silence with deadly intent in it, though. Wufei also knew that Duo was nearby. He wondered how long he could stop from screaming when that torch touched his skin. He could hold out for a little while. He held no delusions that he'd hold out forever. He knew just how badly burning could hurt. Whatever one's strength, it didn't take long for the thinking part of the brain to switch off and leave nothing but a gibbering animal trying to escape from fire by any means.

Morgenstern sighed and turned around. "You leave us no-"

"Alan!"

Everybody looked up as a man came running down the tunnel.

"Alan, the Elders-" the man went right up to Morgenstern and started whispering into his ear urgently.

Morgenstern's face became set. "Already?" he murmured.

He was silent for a moment, eyes narrowed and staring blindly at Wufei.
"Change of plan," he announced. "We move out now. Toruh, give the signal, make sure they're ready for us in the Esplanade."

Ferret tore his eyes away from Wufei's chest to glance at his leader, since it was pretty obvious that was what Morgenstern was. "What? We're moving out now?"

"Yes. We've just run out of time."

"But what about this Pig here? And Maxwell and-"

Morgenstern spoke decidedly, with the natural certainty and presence of a born leader. "We need the Troll, but we don't have the time. We can't lose momentum. And we cannot allow our enemies to get their act together and counter our move, or that will be the end." He turned towards a woman nearby. "Sandra, rejoin Tor and the men hunting for Maxwell, and make sure they find him and the Troll. Mainly the Troll."

"But we need to be with you when you-" the woman started to protest, but Morgenstern cut her off.

"I don't think a few more people will swing things either way. This will work, or this will fail. The dice are cast."

His subordinate looked like she wanted to argue, but she turned away in the end, giving Wufei a single, venomous look before she left.

Morgenstern walked up to Wufei. He put his hand on Carver's shoulder, and the hulking killer straightened up and moved to Wufei's side without a word, flicking off the torch and dropping it to one side. He twisted Wufei's arms back in a professional manner and tied what felt like a length of cable around his forearms. There was a click, some sort of lock. Then Carver jerked his prisoner around until Wufei was facing Morgenstern.

Wufei stared up at Morgenstern who looked down upon him with regret.

"Well, Mr. Chang, I'm sorry it's come to this. I do have some respect for you, despite your choice to fall in with Authority and the Earthers. But I've run out of options. Your arrival here precipitated certain chains of events that I was expecting, though not so soon. You and others have forced my hand, but I am far from helpless. I have always been a good strategist, and I'm particularly adept at turning my enemies' moves against them. Your Commander Une will regret having sent you here."

Wufei felt sure she already did. He owed Barton an apology as well. Looked like his friend had been wrong to trust Wufei to keep his head down and stay out of trouble.

He was hoping Morgenstern would take a minute to explain what it was exactly he was going to do and what the Breakers were planning; if Duo was really nearby, near enough to overhear, it might give him some vital information. But apparently Morgenstern wasn't the kind to gloat over his clever plans, and he didn't consider Wufei important enough to talk to further. The financier nodded at Carver, who forced Wufei to his feet. Another tall, beefy Breaker grabbed Wufei's other arm and held it fast. Breakers fell into step on either side of them as they headed down the tunnel.

Surrounded by men taller than he was, Wufei couldn't see where they were going, but the way the maintenance tunnel was growing wider and wider told him they were heading towards its exit. That would lead them to the heart of Kropotkin though. Surely the Breakers weren't going to be bold and brazen enough to drag Wufei through the streets. This was Freeport, that sort of action was questioned here.

There was a growing murmur in the air. The sound of a large crowd. What the...
The roof tunnel made way for the eternal metal sky of one of Freeport's sector, and the sound of an angry, worried crowd engulfed them. Wufei was starting to get a very ominous feeling, and not only about his own immediate chances of survival.

"Thank Jesus and his Saints!"

Wufei's heart stopped at that cheerful exclamation up ahead of them.

"I thought I'd lost him, but you guys went and found him. Can I have my Blade back, please?"

Ohgodnonono-

"Maxwell?" Morgenstern said, as if he couldn't quite believe his eyes. Wufei twisted in Carver's hold and managed to see over Morgenstern's shoulder.

Kropotkin citizens were hurrying by, expressions worried; they'd stare at Morgenstern's little party as they passed, but they did not stop. They streamed past Duo who was straight ahead, leaning against a lamppost, hands in his pocket and his fuck-you grin firmly in place.

"DU-" Wufei's shout was engulfed as Carver's large palm crammed against his mouth. Wufei tried to bite, and twisted and threw his whole weight against the other Breaker's hold. Carver pressed harder, crushing Wufei's head back against his shoulder until the Preventer could feel his front teeth creak. Wufei screamed in fury and warning against the makeshift gag, his head starting to swim again. He almost missed the next exchange.

"Where's the Troll?" Morgenstern asked quietly.

"Having a comforting cup of coffee with his buddies by now."

"I doubt it. We found a good amount of blood on your escape route, and neither you nor Chang are that wounded. I doubt he could evacuate the tunnels without my men spotting him. You left him somewhere safe. Where?"

"What in space can you threaten me with, Morgenstern?" Duo countered calmly.

Silence was his only answer. This rather confirmed that Wufei's death was now assured, since his life was no longer a bargaining chip. He struggled harder against Carver's hold, but the man was a pro and was keeping Wufei off balance so he couldn't get any leverage. The other Breaker had grabbed the cable looped around Wufei's arms and pulled until it was biting into his skin.

"What are you doing here, Maxwell?"

"What do you think I'm doing here? You got my Blade, man. And I also heard what your little puppet was saying in the Esplanade over there," Duo added, voice suddenly hard and deadly. "I know what you're planning."

"Then maybe you should head towards that ship of yours and get out."

"Like fuck. Give me back my buddy, or I'm coming with you."

Wufei twisted his whole body around, levered himself off of Carver's body and tried to squirm away. He couldn't see, the sparks had invaded his vision once more.

"Let me talk to him."

It was Duo's voice, right next to him. No!
"Wu? Calm down, you're gonna get hurt. Hey, take your hand off his mouth, you shit! You're choking him!"

No, Duo, get away! Run!

He could feel hands on his face, hands that were achingly familiar, every touch, every callus...Fingers wiped the sweat and strands of hair out of his eyes.

"Chang, look at me."

Wufei blinked savagely and cleared enough vision to get a close up view of Duo's face. Duo's lips moved. Don't speak. Let me do the talking.

Wufei managed to jerk his head in denial.

"If these bastards get their way, I'm going down too," Duo whispered at him, pushing Wufei's hair back. "I'll do what I can. We ain't dead yet. But I'm not leaving you either way. You wouldn't either."

Wufei sagged helplessly. Even after Carver lifted his hand away, letting Wufei breathe in short, hard gasps, he could only continue to stare at Duo, powerless, unable to think of anything argument. If the positions were reversed, there would be nothing Duo could say that would make Wufei leave...

Duo patted him briskly on the neck and stepped to his side. Carver heaved Wufei up and forced him to move forward.

"Oh, just so you know, you big fuck," Duo told Carver conversationally, falling in stride, "I don't care what goes down or how I do it, but I'm gonna kill you. I owe it to a couple of friends."

Carver didn't say anything. Wufei was ready to bet the killer hadn't even glanced in Duo's direction.

Wufei took in a ragged breath. "Duo-"

"Shh."

Wufei tried to see his lover, but Duo was just a bit behind him, and Carver was forcing him forward too quickly to turn properly. "But-"

"Shut up, Blade. Let your Handler do the talking."

But they know I'm a Preventer, Wufei wanted to scream at him, though at this point saying that out loud in a crowd would be worse than suicidal. How could Duo think of keeping up the masquerade?

He hoped Duo had a plan, but he had the terrible sinking feeling that his friend was winging it again. He hoped that Fred was really with his fellow Trolls and telling them everything...but would the Troll King move against the Breakers? There was a ring of isolation around Recyc, they stayed out of the colony's politics unless they'd been involved against their will, and then they retaliated on their own and in their own way. Wufei didn't think the King would move to help a couple of pawns caught between the Trolls and the Breakers. Nobody would.

People stared at them as they walked by. Wufei could almost feel the anger and fear tainting the air. He couldn't expect any help from anyone in Kropotkin. He wasn't sure what Morgenstern had told them, but it looked like he and Duo were on their own.

Above the noise of a crowd slowly edging towards panic, Wufei could hear an increasingly loud
voice, amplified by a megaphone. A snatch of words filtered through before the crowd's growl drowned it.

"-they are here! In our colony! We always knew the Earthers would move against us. Now the invasion has started! How many of them are hiding among us?!"

_I'm particularly adept at turning my enemies' moves against them._

The crowd was a multi-headed beast chewing over the words 'invasion', 'attack', 'infiltration'...and 'Preventer'. And now Wufei knew just how bad the situation really was.

Up ahead, Morgenstern ploughed his way through the gathering and made his way up a ramp. Carver put pressure on Wufei's arm and forced him to follow. Wufei hadn't been able to see past his Breaker escort up until now, due to his lack of height, but now he knew where they were.

Kropotkin had what they called The Esplanade; Wufei had seen it on previous visits. In contrast to its grandiose name, it was nothing more than a gigantic pit that led down to the undersector. All sectors had these places where huge cranes hauled up the containers full of essentials the sector needed. Kropotkin had turned this necessity of life into something useful. A platform hung over the deep pit down into the underbelly of the colony. The acoustics of the pit and the buildings around it were perfect for huge crowds of people to hear whoever spoke on the platform. Kropotkin used this place as a meeting hall, to take communal sector decisions and vote on important issues.

Once on the hanging platform, Carver and the other big Breaker forced Wufei towards the guardrail that was the only thing that separated him from the dizzying drop down into the undersector. There was a six-foot span between the platform and the grounds of the Esplanade; the platform was five feet higher than the sector floor, so everybody was getting a good look at him. Wufei stared out over a sea of worried, angry faces, melding together until there were only multitude of eyes and a feeling of undirected alarm centering around him and Duo.

"Here's Alan Morgenstern! We all know him! He's served this sector selflessly for decades!" The man who'd been speaking through the megaphone earlier was a thin, leathery strip of meat who seemed to be trembling with the energy of his message. It was stressful just watching him wave and scream at the crowd, even if you weren't listening to what he was saying. Wufei wondered if this man was just an innocent victim of Morgenstern's machinations, or if this was one of the Breaker agitators who had started riots and rebellions on the colonies this past year.

"Alan has brought us proof! Proof that we've been invaded! Proof that we've been betrayed at the highest level!"

Shit, shit, shit.

The danger wasn't only his and Duo's. He wasn't sure what Morgenstern was aiming for, but it looked like he was going to protect the Breakers by turning them - and everybody else - against Freeport itself, against the Elders, maybe against other sectors...Start dissension right here, as he had in other colonies. And Wufei had played right into his hands.

Morgenstern moved to Wufei's side, while Duo stayed on the other. The financier looked grave, though Wufei, who was right next to the man, could see how the intelligent eyes skipped over the crowd, gauging the growing tension like the director of an orchestra judging if the various instruments were ready to perform yet.

"My friends," he said, his voice quieter than the agitator that had come before. By degrees, the crowd quieted to hear. Wufei took a quick and rough headcount. Morgenstern had staged his little show
right when the workers were coming back from the satellites, factories and shipyards. The whole of Kropotkin was out there, and a few inhabitants from other sectors too by the looks of it. There were Red Bands around, of course, but they looked as confused and worried as everybody else. If the Elders were here or had been warned, Wufei couldn't see them. He didn't know where the Elders featured in Morgenstern's plans, if they were potential allies or enemies, but he was ready to bet the financier had managed to take them out of the equation until things went too far to stop.

"My friends, I can't tell you how devastated I am to say this. But yes, it's true. The running dogs of Authority were never going to leave Freeport alone. We all knew that. And now it has started."

The crowd thrummed like one gigantic fiddle tuned to alarm. Wufei had been in Freeport long enough now; he knew how tired, how anxious people were, with death and disaster constantly one accident away from their home. The people here were strong, amazingly strong, but their fears were strong too...

"We've already found one of their spies here in Kropotkin. They've infiltrated us, they are here, on this station, moving towards us-"

"Whoa! Hold your horses!"

Wufei flinched. No, Duo, don't try to stop this. It's too late. Much too late.

Duo's voice echoed around the buildings, carried on the Esplanade's acoustics. "For God's sake, people, don't turn this into a riot! Come on, most of you guys know me, and you know this man too, if you'd just take a second to look at him instead of freakin' out. It's Chang, my Blade. This man works for me! Do any of you think I'd hurt this colony?! I live here too, I fought for this place and the whole of L2. If Morgenstern's gotta problem with my Blade, he can talk to me, but I say we get a couple of Elders down here now, because this is getting out of control-"

The name 'Maxwell' had been echoing through the crowd, as people near the platform recognized Duo. Maybe it might have worked. Duo wasn't trying to lie or deny anything, he was just trying to break Morgenstern's momentum, get the situation stabilized so that when the whole truth did come out, it wouldn't lead to a lynching.

But Morgenstern was more than ready.

Wufei saw the financier make a gesture towards the back of the platform. The reaction was immediate, a single breathless shout from the crowd underpinned by a few screams, drowning out what Duo was saying. People even staggered away from the platform in a movement of panic. Wufei stared at the crowd, nonplussed. They weren't even looking at him, they were staring at something behind him.

"Bugger," said Duo, his voice lighthearted and feral, a tone Wufei recognized from the bad old days when five child-soldiers had had their backs to the wall and nothing more to lose. Wufei struggled in Carver's hold to catch a glimpse of what Duo and the crowd were looking at. It was like tugging on concrete, until Carver himself turned them both around to see.

A projector had been erected at the back of the platform, it was casting a picture against a nearby building behind them. The picture was huge, taking up half the facade, and quite clear despite the windows punching holes into it. It was Wufei's Preventer ID from his files, with his photo, name, registration number and rank.

That's very clever, Wufei thought weakly, a cold sinking feeling in his guts. The crowd didn't have to take Morgenstern's word for it now; those nearest the platform were staring from him to the
gigantic picture, and confirmation was spreading from mouth to mouth to those behind who couldn't see him as well, a slow, deadly wave. But more important was the effect generated. Even those who weren't close enough to see Wufei were staring up in fear and fascination at the gigantic picture of a hard-faced man in uniform, looking down at them, Authority and Repression made manifest, a looming threat suddenly in their midst. The crowd's voice was now edged with hysteria.

Wufei swallowed painfully and glanced at Duo, wondering if his friend realized what this meant. Duo was staring blindly up at the picture, but Ferret, who'd stepped up to the guardrail behind the smuggler, caught Wufei's glance and smirked.

"Yeah, we knew you'd be coming to us sooner or later, Pig. Alan left you a few crumbs to follow when he realized things were coming to a head too fast. We knew we'd catch you sooner or later, somewhere you didn't belong. Didn't expect you to go through the sewer tunnels. That was smart. We nearly missed you. That would have been very bad for us if we had. You got further than we thought you would, but we got you now. You're so dead, copper. And Maxwell, you're dead too. I'm gonna make you pay for what happened to Herb," Ferret added, suddenly vicious.

"You're what happened to Herb, Al," Duo said without turning around.

"You-" Ferret took a step towards Duo, hand darting into the folds of his coat, but Carver shifted behind Wufei. The killer didn't say anything, but he must have given Al a warning look because the latter stepped back, cowed.

Wufei stared up at his own image overpowering the Esplanade. So it had been a trap. The men from Kropotkin who'd attacked them in the industrial sector a week ago...those two men had been pawns which Morgenstern had sacrificed to draw Wufei into his clutches. Ordinary Kropotkin citizens had seen him and Duo ferreting around their sector today, they'd seen them disappear down an alley, and maybe there'd been surveillance cameras in Morgenstern's building or his room...Enough proof that he was a spy. Wufei's investigation had forced the Breakers to move before they were ready, but Morgenstern had turned Wufei's presence here into a trump card. And now what? Were they going to start a riot? March on Lao Tzu? Take control of the compound? What-

A loud, strident whistle pierced the growing fracas of the crowd. It went on and on, trilling up and down and ending in a rising note that sounded incongruously jaunty.

People stirred. Wufei craned his neck. Off to the right, the crowd was drawing back from half a dozen people. At the forefront, Mako was taking his fingers from his mouth, judging with a glance the effect of his interruption and obviously ready to do it again until he had people's attention. Wufei's eyes widened in confusion. What the hell was Mako doing here, at this stage? And the man standing at his side, tall, ruined and gaunt, was Ravachol, the ex-rebel turned drug lord who'd threatened Wufei and Duo a few months back.

"Well played, Morgenstern," Ravachol said, loud enough to be heard all the way to the platform. "But this is all going to stop. Now."

Wufei turned to Duo, but his friend looked as mystified as he was. They never had figured out where Ravachol fitted into the Breaker organization. He had to fit in somewhere though, considering how he'd maneuvered to block Duo's investigation. It had looked like he knew Wufei's identity, as well. To top it all off, he was a hard-line anarchist, a drug-dealer and a criminal.

But looking at Morgenstern's face, at the sudden tension in those calculating eyes, Wufei realized that whatever else he was, one thing Ravachol was not; he was not on Morgenstern's side, and he wasn't part of the Breaker's plan.
Ravachol made his way through the crowd towards the ramp up to the platform, a step behind Mako who strong-armed out of the way anyone who didn't clear the path fast enough at the sight of him.

"Shit," Wufei heard Ferret mutter behind him. "He showed up...he musta still had some eyes and ears in our sector. Didn't we get rid of them?"

"No time," somebody else whispered.

Wufei twisted on himself. Carver was still holding him with a steely grip around the length of cable pinioning Wufei's hands behind his back, but the Preventer could move his head far enough to glance at Duo. But his friend didn't look like he understood any of this either. Mako's whistle and Ravachol's unhurried advance towards the podium captured attention much more than any shouting could have. People fell back from his approach; they stopped yelling and stared. The voice of the crowd was still angry and borderline hysterical, but now there was a note of bemusement, and questions being hissed back and forth as the ones at the back of the Esplanade craned their necks or climbed lampposts to see what was going on.

There were a dozen people following Ravachol, dressed and armed like pirates and smugglers, and intimidating any Kropotkin citizen who looked askance at them. Wufei recognized a couple of faces from Wanted posters. The rough-hewn escort stopped at the foot of the ramp, obeying Ravachol's curt gesture to stay behind. The drug lord, followed only by Mako, made his way up the incline and found his way to the podium blocked by two Breakers.

"Move," Ravachol said with no particular inflection, "or I will kill you."

The two men looked at Ravachol's ruined body, then they took a second, more cautious look at Mako, a silent promise of swift death behind his friend and employer. But in the end, it was Ravachol's slow, relentless advance that seemed to defeat them. He was moving forward as if they were completely inconsequential and he had already forgotten about them. They fell back, looking to Morgenstern for instructions.

"Frank... " Morgenstern said softly, a regretful note in his voice.

Ravachol stopped ten feet away from the financier. He had his ruined hands sunk deep in his pockets, and now that he was closer, Wufei realized his face was set and grim and his eyes burning with anger.

"Frank," Morgenstern said, more loudly this time. "This is Kropotkin business. We found-"
"I'd say the way you were heading, it's going to be everybody's business pretty fucking soon," Ravachol interrupted. "You do remember I live in Freeport too, right?"

"We found this spy here, in our sector. We have to decide first what we're going-"

"Yeah, but when I hear the words 'invasion' and 'attack', I got the right to feel a bit worried."

Ravachol's smile could have been borrowed from a skull.

He drew a breath to add something else, but a sudden scuffle and a crunch at the back of the wide platform interrupted him. Carver, who was still holding Wufei, half-turned and tensed as if he wanted to intervene in something that was happening behind them. Wufei twisted against the hold pinning his arms back; his shoulders twinged at the joint and the cable serving as crude cuffs bit into his skin, but he was able to see what had gone down. At the back of the platform, three men were flat on their backs or on their knees, obviously the victims of a short but brutal fight. The projector was on the ground, Duo's booted foot firmly planted through the plastic casing. The gigantic picture of Preventer Agent Chang looming over the crowd was gone.

"Oops, I broke something," said Duo, a manic grin on his face and a lethal, calculating light in his eyes. "Don't worry, though, I'm a mechanic. I'll fix it for you. Eventually."

"It's too late, Maxwell," Morgenstern said, with a hard glare at the fallen men for their carelessness. He might say it was too late, but that was a huge psychological advantage that Duo had just removed from the game.

"Too late? Too late for what?" Ravachol asked in a parody of innocent curiosity.

Morgenstern turned back towards the ex-rebel. "What are you doing, Frank?" he asked softly.

"What are you doing, Mister Morgenstern?" Ravachol shot back. In the background, questions and a low rumble of confusion pervaded the crowd. Ignored once more, Duo flicked his braid behind him, stuffed his hands in his pocket and walked back to Wufei's side like he was out for an evening stroll.

Ravachol moved up to the guardrail and stared out at the crowd.

"Can you all hear me?" he asked. He'd spoken quietly, relying on the acoustics of the Esplanade to carry his voice. It forced the people at the far edges of the plaza to shut up and listen instead of shouting questions and getting excited.

To one side, Morgenstern's whip-thin agitator had moved forward to protest, waving his bullhorn like a cudgel. Before he could get more than one word out, Mako stepped up to him casually and murmured in his ear. Wufei couldn't read Mako's lips from that angle, but the threat must have been good, because the loud-mouthed rabble-rouser shut his trap and went as white as a sheet. A few feet away from Wufei and outside of Mako's range, Ferret took in a breath to heckle Ravachol, but was interrupted by a short, sharp metallic 'snick'. Duo's expression was angelically innocent. The switchblade that had materialized in his hand was not. Ferret shut up as well.

The other Breakers looked at Morgenstern. They outnumbered the intruders on the platform three to one, but a brawl at this juncture would muddy the situation beyond control. Morgenstern made a small 'stay where you are' gesture and walked up to Ravachol's other side with all appearances of being perfectly calm.

"Go ahead, Frank. What can you possibly say that can make this look any better? Are you going to deny a Preventer has infiltrated our colony? I gave you all the proof." Morgenstern's voice had shifted subtly, he was talking to the crowd again even as he addressed Ravachol. "I'd love to discuss
this at length, but we don’t have the time. There must be others; they wouldn’t send just one man here. They’ll warn the authorities on the blockade. We all know that Preventer ships have been slowly gathering near Freeport recently. They’re preparing something—"

"I wasn’t about to deny anything.” Ravachol was only talking to the people in front of him, ignoring Morgenstern. "This guy’s name is Chang Wufei, and he joined the Preventers right after the war, back when he was sixteen."

That dropped onto the podium like a bombshell. Duo was the only one to react with a sharp hissed "Hey!", charging forward to grab Ravachol by the elbow.

"So what?" Ravachol asked loudly, not attempting to shake Duo off.

People were staring at him and whispering.

"Yeah, you heard me, this man was a Preventer," Ravachol continued, his voice rising in volume. "And so what? I was a war hero, and now I’m a drug dealer. Mako was OZ black ops, and now he’s my best friend. Maxwell here was a Gundam Pilot, and now he’s a mechanic. Morgenstern was the governor of a colony, and now he serves one, and his own interests as well by the looks of it. And this guy Chang was a Preventer, and now he’s nothing but Maxwell’s hound, and one more refugee in Freeport."

"What?!" Morgenstern exclaimed, losing his fine-tuned control for the first time since Wufei had known him. "Are you claiming—"

"I have my sources too, Mister Morgenstern." Ravachol's voice could have etched glass. "While you were creating a panic, I checked my facts. I have connections; a few well-bribed Pigs who’ll rubber-stamp my cargo. They ran a quick check for me. This guy is no longer on the Preventer payroll. In fact he’s wanted for questioning by the fuckers in High Command and he has a few charges hanging over his head. Apparently that rich fat cat who governs L2 wants to personally nail Chang’s hide to a wall. Now tell me that doesn’t make you like the kid, just a little bit."

Half a dozen people near the platform laughed, a short, breathless sound that wrestled with hysteria. Others stared at Wufei, hostile but puzzled. Wufei, bruised, bloodied, his shirt ripped open, knew he made one hell of a less threatening picture than when his Preventer ID had been plastered across an entire building.

He wondered if Ravachol was lying about him being wanted for questioning. It could be a lie; by the time his claim was proved or disproved, Morgenstern would have lost the element of surprise. But then again, it was quite possible that what Ravachol had said was simply the truth, that Une’s shield over Wufei had finally collapsed and she’d thrown him to the dogs as more a liability than an asset. Thank God, Wufei decided.

"I don’t believe you!" Morgenstern shouted. "You’re lying to-"

"To what?!" Ravachol laughed in his face. He drew his ruined hands from his pockets and shoved them in Morgenstern’s direction. "You honestly think I’d be the one to defend a Preventer? Me?!!"

It was like a game of strategy between the two powerful men, and Ravachol had just scored another point. People knew Frank Ravachol. He wasn’t popular in Freeport, particularly in an orderly sector like Kropotkin. He wasn’t the good citizen that Morgenstern was. But nobody here was about to believe that Ravachol, anarchist war hero, one-time rebel, drug-runner and smuggler, would ever be a pawn of the Preventers.
Morgenstern didn't answer - there wasn't much he could say to that - but his own voice wasn't his only weapon. Wufei understood how Morgenstern operated now. This was the man who'd sown the seeds of violence and riots in dozens of colonies. Wufei glanced at the crowd with the practiced eye of a Preventer, and spotted small knots of anger and seething panic; there would be one of Morgenstern's agitators at the center of each of those spots, infecting the crowd around them with fears and aggression, so much easier to spread than the voice of reason. The confusion on the platform wasn't helping.

"I'm not saying we shouldn't ask questions," Ravachol continued, shouting now to be heard over the growing noise in the Esplanade. "But let's not burn down the colony to ask them. I don't care what this guy was doing in the past; he's been here for months now, and working and living among us like a Blade and nothing more. You already know Duo Maxwell, and he'll vouch for Chang. If you want more, I brought a few other character witnesses as well. Maybe you should all calm down and listen to them."

Character witnesses...? Wufei followed the direction of Ravachol's gesture and his heart lurched in his chest.

Babka was right up near the front of the mob, pushing Gilla's wheelchair. There was also Kolia, Nathan, Maria Konstantina, a Red Band Wufei knew by sight...all from Makhno. Wufei knew these people, even though he'd never spoken a word to them. He'd worked alongside them, he'd helped them repair the colony's infrastructure, he'd listened to them talk about their lives.

A few of them were looking at Wufei strangely, and Wufei hoped they'd arrived after that picture of him was destroyed. Some might believe he was a Preventer. They didn't know him all that well. But then again...

"It's absolutely ridiculous!" Babka's cultured tones were reaching Wufei across the gap to the platform. She used to be a teacher; she could get her voice to carry, and she was hectoring the knot of Kropotkin citizens around her as if they were naughty schoolchildren. "I'm sure I don't know what Mr. Morgenstern is talking about, but it's obviously a mistake. I was under Alliance control for decades; I know what they're like! Wufei is a polite young man, he has a great heart, and he'd never betray Duo - I know that for a fact - and if you believe Duo Maxwell would work for the Authority, you-"

...But then again, Wufei reminded himself, these people had a very narrow view of what a Preventer was; another OZ in jackboots, harbingers of a police state and repression. Wufei's silent investigation, the care he'd taken to blend in, his relationship with Duo...that probably didn't match up to what they imagined an instrument of tyranny would be like.

"Of course, Duo Maxwell can vouch for him," Babka twittered (loudly). "They're- how should I put it? - quite close. Quite close. I should know, I am their neighbor, and oh dear, the walls are so thin, not that I mind."

Wufei was busy judging the crowd's agitation, the impact of the various moves by Ravachol and Morgenstern. If there were any opportunity to act, he would have to grab it. But, in the very unlikely chance he survived this day, Wufei knew that he was going to remember what Babka had just said. And he was going to be so very, very embarrassed...

Gilla was staring at him. The old man was astute, and Wufei could feel the gaze carving into him. But finally Gilla's deep voice chimed in, a counterpoint to Babka's words. "He's been here for months, and he's done nothing suspicious or been anything but Maxwell's Blade as far as I can tell. That's all I have to say on the matter."
"I wish you hadn't brought them, Rav." It was Duo who'd spoken softly. He was still standing next to Ravachol. "If this gets ugly, they'll get hurt."

"If this gets ugly, the whole place is going down in flames. They'll be just as screwed," Rav said callously. "I would have rounded up more, but I didn't have much time. I'm surprised I found that many to stand up for you two, and who'd come all the way to Kro just because you were in trouble."

He added something in a harsh, suddenly hostile whisper. Wufei was a few feet away, he only caught a couple of words. It sounded like acid compliments on Duo's successful insertion of a Preventer into Freeport's life and heart.

Duo's expression didn't change. "If that's the way you want to see it," was all he said with a shrug. He was looking at the gathered Makhno citizens with eyes full of worry, affection and pride.

Wufei didn't particularly care what Ravachol thought of him either. It wasn't as if they'd ever get along. Wufei was watching Morgenstern; he was the real enemy here.

Morgenstern had stepped away and was talking to a few people. One of them was the woman, Sandra. Wufei hoped that didn't mean they'd caught Fred. Duo would surely have left the Troll somewhere safe.

The financier said a few words, and Sandra and the others dispersed with quick nods. Wufei tensed against Carver's hold, testing it. Morgenstern was not a man you could safely underestimate.

Ravachol's interference was a serious blow, but Wufei was sure the financier was already preparing his counteroffensive.

Morgenstern approached the railing. The movement of the crowd beyond was one of utter confusion, which was almost as dangerous as terror and rioting.

"My friends. I would like to discuss this at length. But it takes one hour for a Preventer fleet to get here from their position around the embargo, and we have no more time."

A nervous hush fell over the crowd. The leathery-thin agitator had approached Morgenstern with the bullhorn, but the financier waved him away.

"Yes, what I am suggesting is extreme. But this is not the first time in our history that this has had to happen. This is Freeport; it belongs to each of us, not to any centralized authority. We have granted certain powers to chosen Elders among us; respected people. Dedicated people. I do not think they are all to blame, but for the Preventers to have infiltrated Freeport, there must be some in the lot that have betrayed us."

The word 'betrayed' caused a ripple to run around the crowd. The nearest faces were frightened and grim.

"I am not coming to you on a spontaneous whim. I know - personally - how the Authority acts and how they take over. For years, I have been watching the developments in ESUN, and I can see them moving against us. The war didn't touch us, but this so-called Peace, which put that Earther Peacecraft in charge of Space, will harm us just as surely. They will not attack us openly; they are not as blatant as OZ. But they will eat away at us little by little. They hike the prices of basic necessities, they put brakes on the shipping industry, they harass Sweepers as much as they do the pirates and smugglers...they are very slowly strangling us, and I knew one day they'd move on to the next phase and start undermining us from the inside. To oppose this slow death, I have created a group here, a citizen's watch, if you will."
Ravachol snorted, a hard, sardonic sound.

"Because I feared that the lure of this 'Peace' might have beguiled some on this colony, I have kept my efforts a secret. It was not my choice; it is the only weapon against the kind of insidious enemy we face. Now, I have to ask you to trust me, and to trust my friends. Our knowledge is sound. I can look at you all and tell you...we have been compromised." Morgenstern's voice rose without effort. "We have been betrayed. The enemy is at our gates!"

Wufei felt the urge to shake his head. They were...just words, but this man could craft them masterfully. What he was saying was no different than the speeches of a hundred demagogues before him, but he had charisma, certainty... faith, even. He probably thought he was doing the right thing. This man is like Treize, Wufei thought. The words are worn and threadbare, but they can still move mountains, and crush us all.

"You know why they are trying to do this. Why they have sent spies and saboteurs to Freeport. Why they want to destroy us - or even better, watch us destroy ourselves and then come to 'save' us, like the Alliance did before them. Peacekeepers!"

A dull rumble of hate echoed his words. Many people here - like Gilla, like Morgenstern, like thousands of others - had escaped to Freeport when the so-called peacekeeping forces of the Alliance had invaded their colonies after the original Heero Yuy's assassination.

"They want to destroy us because we are the seeds of resistance to their authority, just as we resisted the Alliance before them. We are the light of Freedom in space. We know what's behind their lies, and we know exactly what their Earther Peace is worth!" Morgenstern's voice had become rich, powerful, and gilded at the edges with long-seated hatred. "Why do you think, five years into this so-called Peace, that there are riots and unrest in every colony? Why? They're slowly tightening their grip. They're no better than the Alliance. No better than OZ. They've ruthlessly crushed people who were simply demanding the right to choose. To choose what? Anarchy! Anarchy over their pretended Democracy, that feeds the rich and starves the poor and keeps the status quo. The fire of Anarchy is being lit in every corner of Space, and they know that that's because we - we, here, in Freeport - have shown others it can be done!"

Anarchy? Was that Morgenstern's aim all along? Wufei glanced at Ravachol. That had been the drug-dealer's cause too, before the end of the war. Had he known this was what the Breakers were after? Assuming it wasn't all a lie.

The crowd had gone fairly quiet, listening to Morgenstern's words; an ominous silence. The whole assembly was on the knife-edge of something truly brutal and dangerous, something Wufei had seen on colony after colony this past year, and had never wanted to see in Freeport. He'd controlled and restrained dozens of riots in his career, and in his experience it was safer when everybody was shouting. There was something hungry and frightening in this pent-up silence, more frightening than a screaming, raging mob which could be stopped with tear gas, rubber bullets and the arrest of the ringleaders. This was the silence before an avalanche. When this silence broke, the resulting thunder would be heard throughout Freeport, and the rest of ESUN as well.

Wufei knew what the results would be. A riot turned revolution was ugly beyond words. And there was a pent-up power and frustration in Freeport that made it truly frightening. Even with a full troop of Preventers, counter-agitators and riot-police, he wasn't sure he'd be able to stop this without doing a lot of damage, and of course, he had none of these; not here. Because Wufei knew the Preventers, his colleagues, he knew Relena, Une, Trowa. Despite what Morgenstern was saying, this was not the way they operated. They might send Wufei to do the dirty work, but they did not crush indiscriminately. The Preventer fleet Morgenstern was bringing up like a bogeyman was not on its
way to subdue Freeport. There was nothing to stop Morgenstern if he managed to spark a riot here.

"We cannot afford to hesitate! Now is the time for extreme measures! Now is the time to go to the wall to defend our freedom! We will not cause needless harm or damage. We don't need to. We only want to make sure that there are people we can trust at the colony's defense grid and access points when the soldiers attack. If we can hold them off, the other industrial colonies in L2 will come to our support. Many of them are ready to rebel. Once they do, the Earther's scattered forces will not be able to hold them all down. Now is the time to act! Now is the time to insure our Freeport survives, and spreads its freedom to all of Space. Now is the time to-"

"Burn churches."

The crowd's very silence insured that Duo's words echoed throughout the Esplanade, chasing away the triumph of Morgenstern's declarations.

Morgenstern paused. He'd been undoubtedly ready for some kind of intervention from either Duo or Ravachol, and was prepared to shoot any objection down. It'd be so easy. In this deadly silence, the words 'traitor' and 'sell-out' could kill as surely as a bullet. But Morgenstern didn't know what Duo had meant by that, and so he hesitated, unsure how to counter those two words.

Duo didn't look at the crowd, he was staring at the ground. Morgenstern had the charisma of tyrants and heroes. But Duo had something else, harder to define. It wasn't bright and elevating; it was sinister and frightening, and it didn't need to wave a flag to command attention. The darkness of a thousand deaths looking over his twenty-year-old shoulders was enough.

"AC 187. A group of rebels came up with the same line of fucking bullshit. They hid out in the church of a gentle, compassionate man called Father Maxwell. He was a pacifist who didn't hold with any kind of violence. You all know what happened next. A priest, a kind nun, two seminary students and nine orphans of all ages, as well as a bunch of rebels. Burned and blasted and slaughtered where they stood. There was only one survivor and you're looking at him."

Maxwell Church, thought Wufei, feeling stunned as the memory of old headlines and a sense of impersonal indignation at the brutality of the repression suddenly became very immediate and personal indeed. Dammit Duo...why didn't you tell us? Why didn't you tell me?

But had he ever told Duo about Meiran, Treize, his colony's fate? They never talked about things like that. During the war, they'd accepted that each of the five of them had had their reasons, their wounds, but they hadn't talked about them. They hadn't counted on each other for comfort; they'd counted on each other to act.

Duo finally looked up, straight at Morgenstern. His eyes were those of the child-killer who had once piloted Deathscythe. "I know where you're leading us, Morgenstern. I know because I've already been there. I'm telling you here and now: you want to take Freeport down this road, you're doing it over my dead body."

"An excellent notion!" Ravachol clapped his ruined hands together in a parody of enthusiasm. "We're talking and talking- well, Morgenstern wants us to march on Lao Tzu and take over, but either way, we're not sorting this out the Freeport way. I know Kropotkin's a bit more civilized than my sector, but they have the same traditions. Time to put your money where your mouth is, gentlemen, or we'll never resolve this. If we can't talk this out, we'll have to fight it out instead. Any takers?"

"We don't have time for that!" Morgenstern snapped at him, though he was still speaking for the crowd. "Are you insane?! The warships could be within-"
"Yeah, funny that, I don't hear any sirens. You sure this fleet of yours is on its way?"

"It is, and by the time their cannons persuade you, Ravachol, it will be too damn late for all of us."

"Well then hurry up and get this over with."

"Why should I-"

"Because if you have your way, a lot of people will die today, so we might as well start right now!"

Ravachol's deep, broken voice cracked like a gavel across the Esplanade.

"I saw ships invade my own colony, Morgenstern, same as you. Did that stop either of us from fighting back? Hardly! No, I'll tell you when it's too late! It's too late when men like you wave a flag in front of our faces and make us forget what we're fighting for. As you said, this is Freeport! We're not fucking sheep, all going in the same direction! If this is the war that's upon us, let's start it right here, right now!"

He took one step towards Morgenstern, who unconsciously backed away. Behind Wufei, Carver tensed murderously. Nobody else moved.

"You have a choice!" Ravachol's yellow face was flushed with anger, turning his sallow cheeks into a strange brick-like color. "I have friends at Kro's main hatch, and they believe in what I say, and you have your men-" the word was spat out like an insult "-all around and talking riot in the crowd. That's two sides right there. You want a war? You can have it! I'll fight you, Morgenstern, and if the Preventers show up, I'll fight them too! I don't form alliances of convenience against a common enemy any more! I'll fight like a soldier or I'll fight like a cornered rat, but I'll not let you or anyone lead me blindly to the slaughterhouse! Your choice! You want a war - right here, in your sector, with all these people - your people - in the middle? Or do you want a slightly more civilized duel to decide this."

The hush in the plaza was thick and sticky with worried murmurs. Everyone's attention was focused on the platform.

"If your Blade wins - and I know he's your Blade, Morgenstern, I checked the registration; very clever piece of paperwork there. I didn't think you could make anyone disappear that well in Freeport, and trust me, I have been looking for him. If your Blade wins, I'll let you have your way, and so will Maxwell. There, like that you have something to gain as well."

"If he wins, I won't be in any state to object," Duo drawled, juggling his switchblade one-handed.

Ravachol's eyes flickered towards Duo. "No, to be fair, it should be Blade against Blade. After all-"

"No!" Duo shouted, spinning on Ravachol.

"After all, Chang is the cause of all this-"

"I said no!"

Ravachol continued talking, despite Duo savagely grabbing the front of his coat. "He's the cause of all this mess, and he's your Blade, so-"

Wufei didn't listen to the arguments. He craned his neck until he could look up at Carver behind him.

"Hey, you," he said quietly. Carver twitched and looked down at him in surprise. "It's in your side's
best interest to finish this quickly. So let's do this. You and I have something to settle."

Carver stared down at him for a few long seconds. A dark temptation colored his eyes. But then his
gaze lifted towards Morgenstern, looking for instructions. It was the sort of look a dog gave its
master.

Morgenstern had approached Carver and Wufei, most of his attention on Ravachol and Duo's
argument, perhaps hoping the coalition against him would disintegrate on its own. "You probably
don't care, Preventer," he said without glancing at Wufei, "but there is a rule in Freeport that says a
Blade is only supposed to talk to his Handler."

"In Freeport, they're called traditions," Wufei answered softly. "But that's not the point. You know
what Duo is to me. If there's a tradition - or a rule or even a law carved into the celestial jade throne -
that says I have to stand by and let your zombie kill my lover, then I will challenge that with
everything I have."

Morgenstern glanced at him in surprise. He measured Wufei with a long, calculating look, then
Carver behind him.

"Let me go," Wufei said, still speaking quietly. And dammit, but it did go against the grain to talk to
anyone but Duo. He'd been in Freeport too long...But what he'd told Morgenstern was the truth. As
much as he respected Freeport's traditions, he wasn't about to let Duo fight a battle which should
rightfully be his. "Let me go, Morgenstern, and you have my word that I will talk Duo into this and
get this duel started quickly."

"It'll take a few minutes to go get the weapons," Morgenstern said with a gesture of ill-humor. "You
have that much time. Otherwise I'm calling Ravachol's bluff, and I'll make sure those people who
came out to stand up for you are the first to die in the fighting."

Wufei took a deep breath - but he swallowed his words and his anger, and merely nodded. "I'll use
my sword, if your people bring it to me. Your dog can use his machete if he wants."

Morgenstern chuckled, a humorless bubble of laughter that caused both Duo and Ravachol to pause
in their argument and glance over at the Breaker suspiciously. "Sword?! My my, Preventer, you are
refreshingly brave and straightforward, but you have no idea where you've landed. We have our own
way of doing things in Kropotkin. We have our way of doing things in Freeport, and despite your
pretty little speech, you do not know us or our traditions. Very well, Chang, I have your word you
and Duo won't waste any more of my time. Al, go get...you know what, for the duel." He laughed
again, and Ferret joined in, a sick little giggle of anticipation.

Wufei didn't bother to think about it; he'd figure out what was so funny later. He didn't even glance
at Carver who'd released his arms from the cable. Wufei headed towards Duo as soon as he could
move, rubbing his sore arms to get the circulation back.

"Wufei, get over here!" Duo grabbed his arm and thrust Wufei behind him as if he could defend him
against all opponents. The switchblade drew a shining, dangerous line between the two young men
and everyone else, Ravachol and Mako, Morgenstern and Carver.

"Duo, you're going to have to let me do this," Wufei started.

"No!" Duo shoved him back further, eyes still intent on his enemies. "You don't know what you're
getting into- this is Kro, they got this sick custom here. And you're injured!"

"02, look at me."
Duo's breath was coming fast and hard. He was still staring straight ahead. But in his hand, the knife slowly sunk down to his side.

Wufei reached out and turned Duo's face towards him with a gentle touch on his cheek.

"I'm a bit bruised, but I feel better than I have for years."

The big blue eyes blinked at him in surprise. Wufei smiled, completely honest and openly for what felt like the first time in his life.

"I am fighting for Justice, and I'm doing it my way. I'm fighting for a colony I can actually save this time, unlike my own home. I'm fighting for the law, and also for your traditions. And I'm fighting for you. I can't get much better than this. Let me go, Duo. And don't worry. I've fought him before. I know I can take him."

Duo's lips moved, shaping themselves around an objection he didn't vocalize.

"Let me do my job, Pilot," Wufei whispered, leaning his forehead against Duo's, "and you do yours. We can protest and rail, but in the end, we do what we believe is right. It's who we are. You have something greater to fight for, too."

"If you die, Freeport can burn and I won't give a fuck," Duo whispered.

"You don't mean that," Wufei said gently.

"...No. But I almost wish I did. Why does it always have to be for the greater good? Why can't it just be for us? Just this once..."

"If you need that rationale, then remember that we'll neither of us get through this crowd without getting lynched if nothing dramatic happens in the next few minutes."

A smile like a dead man's rictus crossed Duo's face. Then he turned towards Morgenstern. "Fine," he said, over the grumbling noise of the increasingly restless crowd. "You have your duel. My man will make mincemeat out of your rabid dog."

"In a few minutes," Morgenstern said, glancing up from a tight knot of his people.

"He's plotting something," Wufei muttered. "He's good at turning our moves against us."

"Well, in this instance he won't have to try very hard," Ravachol commented. "I'm on the ropes; if this fails, we're all screwed" The ex-rebel was leaning against the platform's railing nearby, looking at Morgenstern with fatalism in his jaundiced eyes.

"Damnit, you bastard, why did you volunteer Wufei for this?" Duo snapped, turning on him. "Can't you see he's been knocked about enough already?"

Ravachol glanced at Wufei rather than at Duo, and his smile was not pretty. "Why did I do it? He was there, I guess, and he was kinda convenient."

"Huh?"

"Let it go, Duo," Wufei muttered. He didn't care for Ravachol's reasons, which, to him, were pretty clear. Maybe a part of the man's motives were to spare Duo from a dangerous fight out of some lingering sense of respect and friendship for Deathscythe's pilot; but the blunt truth and his main motivation in the matter was that he expected Carver to kill Wufei. He was probably counting on it.
Even if the whole Breaker plot came to light, Ravachol would still be left with the very embarrassing fact of Chang Wufei, Preventer, being on board Freeport with Ravachol's knowledge. A dead cop was less of a liability than a live one being interrogated by the Lao Tzu Elders.

"Now I get it," Duo said softly.

For a moment, Wufei thought Duo had jumped to the same conclusion. But his lover was not glaring murder at Ravachol; he was staring at a spot in the crowd around the platform. Wufei followed his gaze. Duo was staring at the knot of Ravachol's supporters that had been left at the foot of the ramp.

"That's Marta Bernstein," Duo said, anger coloring his words.

Wufei, startled, looked more closely at the group of people. Among the big bruisers, pirates and smugglers, a small woman stood staring up at them. She wasn't ravaged with shock this time, so he hadn't recognized her immediately, but this was the woman who'd been Joshua Brindlow's common law partner. Joshua, the man Carver had murdered not four blocks from here.

"Now I get it." Duo looked at Ravachol with a cruel smile. "Joshua was one of your guys, wasn't he."

Wufei was a good observer by nature; he caught the minutest flinch from Ravachol.

Duo nodded. "Is that how you got mixed up in all this? I've been wondering since you popped up earlier. What happened? Why did Carver kill Josh?"

"Carver?"

"The big fuck with the dead eyes over there."

"Is that his name?" Ravachol looked at Carver with undisguised hostility. Carver, listening to Morgenstern, glanced up, caught the gaze and turned away without the slightest response.

"A nickname. Suits him down to the ground. So, what happened, Rav? Were you trying to find out more about Morgenstern? You have eyes and ears in every anarchist cell in Space. You knew about the Breakers, Morgenstern's little plot against the colonies. Didn't you?"

"Many would say it's Morgenstern's little plot for the colonies," Ravachol said in a slightly bemused voice, as if he was suddenly wondering what he was doing on the wrong side of a rebellion.

"Oh, don't give me that shit."

"I used to believe in that shit..." The sunken eyes turned inwards. "But now...I guess I was just curious. These 'Breakers' covered their tracks, but stuff was happening that made me wonder what was going on out there. My men were being tasked to run some strange cargo. Old allegiances were getting called on. It looked like the kind of mess brewing that might be bad for my business. So...well, I was just curious."

Curious? Or had the one-time rebel been concerned for the colonies he'd defended so fiercely during the war? Wufei thought that even Ravachol might not fully understand the motives that had pushed him out of his bitter apathy.

"And then your little friend came onboard." Ravachol favored Wufei with an ugly look. "I've had my suspicions of Heero for quite some time, but this guy? He stinks of the Law. I was able to track down his records, though it took me awhile. So I knew the Pigs were after somebody on Freeport. From the questions you asked, and from what I knew of Chang and of outside, I was able to put it
together. I figured out who you were looking for. This 'Carver' of yours came in on one of my ships. Nobody knew who the fuck he was, but some powerful people vouched for him, and that was weird too. I decided to find out if there was enough shit here for the Pigs to start rooting around seriously. It might have compromised my own deals."

"So you managed to dig up Carver's tracks and have him followed," Duo guessed, his voice acrid. "But not by one of your guys; that could have vexed those 'powerful people' who vouched for Carver. You needed someone unconnected to your business, someone they might not link to you if he was spotted. Did you pay Josh."

"Josh was a friend of mine," Ravachol said in a dangerous voice. "From one of my earliest cells, during the war. I would not have put him in harm's way if I thought..."

"If you'd realized what a piece of work you'd set him to following? Yeah, Josh didn't stand a fucking chance. Carver spotted his tail and killed him. Is that it?" Duo snorted; Ravachol's grim expression was all the answer he needed. "So you decided to really find out what was going on. And you and your smugglers were the group the Breakers were afraid of. You have a lot more means than I do, and you knew some of his men, for having smuggled them around. For fuck's sake, Rav! Why did you warn us off like that?! Why didn't you ask me to help instead?!"

Ravachol looked at Wufei. "I told you before; I don't like the company you keep."

"Don't you think this was a bit more important than that?!"

Ravachol's ruined hands were clasped together like dead spiders. "I know all too well that an alliance can be broken, and that the enemy of my enemy is not my friend."

Mako leaned in and tapped both his friend and Duo on the shoulder, interrupting the vicious staring match between them. "Guys? Morgenstern's got it ready for the duel."

Damn, that reminded Wufei of something. He tugged urgently at Duo's sleeve. "Duo, I lost my sword. I think it was left back there in the maintenance tunnel. Can we send someone to fetch it?"

Duo winced and looked at Wufei with pain in his eyes. "Wu, you don't get it. Kro has...er..."

"Kropotkin has a tradition," Ravachol declared with a glance at the Breaker who'd come running up to Morgenstern. "It's refreshingly barbaric for such a proper, civilized sector. But in a way, that's its purpose. It insures that very few people fight duels in Kropotkin, and if they do, they've got a fucking good reason to. Duels here are no joke. I think the last one was over four years ago. It wasn't pretty. Both fighters died in the end, didn't they, Mako?"

"I don't know, but I wouldn't be surprised," Mako drawled, calculating eyes on the weapons the Breaker had presented to Morgenstern for inspection.

Duo's hand had closed on Wufei's wrist like a clamp, as if he wanted to try to drag Wufei behind him again. Wufei barely noticed. He was staring in dawning comprehension at the two apparently incongruous objects the Breaker was holding.

A couple of long-handled meat hooks.
Chapter 33

"I know that the sunset empire shudders and shakes
I know there's a floodgate and a raging river
I say see the silence of the ribbons of iron and steel
I say hear the punch drunk budle drive hammer and wheel

Sometimes you're beaten to the call
Sometimes you're taken to the wall
But you don't give in"

---Midnight Oil, Sometimes

Mako sauntered over to the Breaker carrying the meat hooks. He chose one of the crude weapons and swished it around carelessly by the handle. Wufei's eyes stayed fixed on the vagaries of the ugly bent hook. He barely noted how the Breaker handed the second weapon to Carver.

"Wufei, this is nuts," Duo hissed at him, his eyes on Carver as the larger man tested the sharp end with his thumb. "You have to let me do this. You got beaten up not two hours ago, and you've never fought with a hook before-"

"Have you?" Wufei asked without tearing his eyes away from the instrument in Mako's hand.

"I've fought with lots of different weapons," Duo said evasively.

"That would be a 'no' then. I've trained with short sticks and wooden sabers-"

"That won't be anything like it!" Duo snapped. "This isn't something you find in a dojo, Chang."

"He's right," said Mako, heading back to them. He tossed the hook at Wufei when he was four feet away. "This thing has no fucking balance at all."

Wufei caught the long piece of metal, bent into a sharpened hook at one end, and had to agree. It wasn't quite as heavy as he'd thought it'd be, but the weight was all in the u-bend at the end.

"Be smart, Duo," Mako added, as Duo started to protest again. "With your fingers, you can't hold the grip firm. You wouldn't stand a chance; not against that big ape. You and Rav have your differences, but now we gotta work together. I'll help Chang get ready here, you two try to figure out what happens after the duel, however it goes. Morgenstern isn't going to roll over and play dead even if Chang wins."

Duo grumbled, but let Mako shoo him off to one side of the platform where Ravachol and a Red Band were talking in low voices.

"Take off your shirt. It won't protect you, and you'll just be giving him something loose to grab. You're right handed, right?" Mako drew out a roll of tape from his back pocket, the kind boxers put on to protect their knuckles beneath their gloves.

Wufei hesitated.

"Just can the act, Chang. I know you're no Blade. If you want to keep up the rigmarole, I can ask
Duo to give you permission to talk to me due to an emergency, but let's not do that and say we did. If we wait too long, your public will get restless," Mako added with a toothy smirk.

A lot of people were indeed watching the preparations on the platform with the kind of anticipation that had triggered a lot of self-righteous condemnation in Wufei when he'd first arrived. Now he understood it better. Vicarious thrills had its share, true; Freeport could be a cruel and violent place, and people adapted to their environment. But it was more than that. This bloodshed would be a resolution, a conclusion. These people were witnesses, this duel was part of a pact that kept Freeport together even when internal strife threatened to tear it apart. It wouldn't do to delay that. Besides, Wufei had given Morgenstern his word that he would try to expedite things, and Mako knew who he was by now, there was no point in being coy and keeping up the charade. Wufei nodded tersely and gripped the meat hook's handle in his right hand. The metal was screwed into a large wooden grip that didn't fit his fingers too well. Butchers probably had bigger hands than he did. He lowered his arm; the hook ended at the ankle. About the size of a short Jian, and Wufei had trained with that sort of blade.

"Don't think of it as a sword," Mako said, as if reading his mind. "I've fought with a tool like this before. I'd show you the scar, but I'd have to strip and the audience ain't here for that kinda show."

"I'm glad you're finding this amusing," Wufei muttered, face away from the crowd.

"It's good advice I'm giving you, though fuck me if I know why I'm helping a Pig," Mako said, pulling off a length of wrapping tape. "Don't try to use the sharp end. If you snag him somewhere non-vital, you won't get the hook out again before he can kill you. You have to use it to break bones; that's the trick. Use it like a badass cudgel, and don't worry about the hook until he's down and ready for the kill."

Mako roughly taped Wufei's fingers over the grip of the meat hook and tying it at the palm, making sure he'd keep his hold on the weapon. Then he grabbed Wufei's other hand and wrapped up his knuckles and wrist as well. Wufei almost asked Mako why he was helping him, but Mako's attention was only partly on what he was doing. Wufei followed the man's gaze to where it rested on Carver. There was a cold, calculating anger in Mako's grey eyes that the lazy smirk couldn't quite hide. Wufei remembered that Joshua Brindlow had been a friend of Ravachol's. Maybe Mako had known him too. Even if he hadn't, in Freeport, your friends and the friends of your friends were as vital as the air you breathed.

The pale grey eyes left Carver and fastened on Wufei's arms, assessing, before they rested on his features.

"Kill him for me and I might just let you live, Preventer."

"Or stand in line and I'll get to you when I'm done with him," said Wufei, resting the weight of the metal hook against his shoulder.

Months ago, when he'd first set eyes on Mako, Wufei had been distantly interested in the man's mouth. He'd been correct in his assessment back then: Mako really did look exceptional when he smiled.

"It's been awhile since I was outside," Mako said slowly. "Are there a lot of Pigs like you out there?"

Considering what Wufei was about to do..."No, probably not," he conceded. "And technically I'm not one of them anymore."

"Their loss." Mako measured Carver with a glance. "He's got the weight and the range, but I think
you got your chances. Kill him. Okay, Chang's ready here!"

A space had cleared itself in the centre of the stage; people had moved to the sides, or gone down the ramp to join the crowds at the edge of the huge pit over which the platform was hanging. Carver and Morgenstern were standing to one side. The financier was talking to his Blade in a low voice. Carver was nodding in response to the last-minute orders. They glanced up at Mako's signal. Carver's brown eyes fastened on Wufei.

A hand gripped Wufei's shoulder. "I hope you know what you're doing, Chang," Duo commented.

"Get Babka and the others out of here if you can. Morgenstern said he'd make sure they were in the frontline if things blew up."

"He won't lay a finger on them," was the steely answer.

Wufei glanced at his friend. Duo had a hard crooked smile on his face. He was getting battle ready too, diving into the warrior's mindset where you soldiered on despite the losses, and you didn't mourn your dead as long as they managed to take enough of the enemy with them. It was necessary; it was what was called for. But...

Always for the greater good....Never for us...

Wufei knew that his job now was to take down Carver whatever the cost to himself. It would be a blow against Morgenstern, it would protect Freeport, it would give Duo a chance. Three good reasons to die. But Wufei suddenly decided he wasn't going to. He'd take Carver down, yes, but he was damned if he was going to do so at that price. Duo had lost a lot in his life. Wufei didn't want to become one more cross for Duo to bear. His lover didn't deserve that. Duo had lost a lot in his life. Wufei didn't want to become one more cross for Duo to bear. His lover didn't deserve that. Duo had trusted him, had taken him in. Even when he'd learned how much Wufei had lied to him, Duo had accepted that and the necessities of Wufei's job. He'd seen beyond it, in a way Wufei sometimes struggled to.

Remembering the way Duo had reached out to him, the respect he offered Wufei and the work they'd done together, Wufei could almost let himself believe he deserved to live for his own sake as well as Duo's.

"Duo-"

Duo glanced his way. "Yeah?"

"...Have a plan ready for when I finish this, will you?" Wufei said. Because what he really wanted to say was too long, complicated and personal for the minute he had left before a public duel. He'd be hard put to put his thoughts and feelings into words at the best of times.

The hard smile wavered. Maybe those other words didn't need saying out loud after all, not between the two of them.

His lover looked away. "Just get back in one piece and I'll let you in on it," Duo muttered quickly, as if he was trying to get that said and done before Fate realized they were making promises to each other and decided on one last universal irony.

Wufei nodded. It was as good as a vow.

He walked towards the centre of the platform. Carver was already there. Wufei didn't pay heed to the sound of feet hastily backing away from the improvised arena. His mind moved past the noises of the crowd, it faded from his mind as he focused. He'd made a promise, now he had to keep it.

Carver had stripped out of his shirt and coat as well. Scars pockmarked the Space-pale skin. A bullet
impact, a few ragged tears from a blade. Carver was holding the meat hook as if it were weightless, but without the benefit of having it strapped to his fingers. This might give Wufei a chance to disarm him.

Wufei slowly detached his mind from Duo, from his friends, from Freeport's fate, and stared into Carver's eyes. They were frighteningly steady and sure. Carver had moved into the warrior's headspace faster than Wufei had. Maybe he never really left it.

Wufei wasn't surprised by the sudden attack when it came. It had been in Carver's eyes all along. He fell back and sideways, evading the charge. Carver wasn't swinging the hook; it was held out like a hand ready to grasp. He was probing.

Carver fell back, though not all the way. Wufei circled him, measuring the other man. Memories of Carver's victims passed fleetingly through Wufei's mind. He forced himself to distance himself from them. He could not afford anger or indignation, not if he wanted justice for those dead.

The platform faded from Wufei's senses; only the essence of its boundaries remained, the space he had to work with. The crude instrument in his hand was starting to feel familiar beneath his fingers. It didn't matter that it had no balance, that it couldn't cut, that it was barbaric and brutal. It was becoming a part of him. So, in a way, was Carver.

The big man moved like a tiger, muscles rippling as he sprang forward at a tangent. Wufei was ready. He swung out, a short sharp jab with the shaft of the hook, aiming at Carver's elbow.

Carver dodged the blows. Wufei spun around on one foot and struck down at Carver's knee with his heel.

The blow didn't connect, Wufei's timing and speed were slightly off, and his opponent was fast. Carver backed off a step, then he hammered down with his hook, aiming the sharp point at Wufei's head.

Wufei dodged sideways. The metal almost brushed his bare shoulder, the swish of its passage leaving a cold trail on his bare skin.

Both fighters broke and started circling again, measuring each other once more with the aid of this new knowledge they'd gained.

The blood was pounding at the back of Wufei's head where he'd been hit earlier, and his bruises and the small burn on his neck were flaring under the cold air of Kropotkin. He could measure how much stamina he had left; it would not give him the luxury of dragging this fight out. But he didn't let that knowledge panic him as he slowly focused fully on his opponent.

He stared into the flat, brown eyes and thought: we are quite alike, you and I.

It was a difficult admission, but in this void created by his concentration there was no room for self-delusion.

There was a lot of loss and anger behind those eyes. It wasn't directed at anyone still living. It had formed like a cyst around Carver's soul. Carver had given over his future, his choices, his existence to another; to a man who could still look into the future and make plans. Carver no longer made plans. He no longer judged or took decisions. He merely performed the duties that his master gave him. It wasn't cowardice; he'd chosen his path, and he would walk it to the bitter end, because that was his choice.

We could have been even more alike...but in the end, I chose differently.
Wufei was no longer looking at Carver with hate, disgust or even pity. They'd both chosen the road that had taken them here; they both wore a collar, like most men did in the end. Now Wufei had a promise to keep, and Carver had orders. The real battle started here.

It would have to be short. The longer it lasted, the worst Wufei's chances, as his injuries started to drag him down.

Carver attacked again. He darted in from Wufei's right, the hook trailing behind him, wound back and aimed at Wufei. The Preventer took three steps to the side, taking some of the deadly arc out of that potential swing, his own instrument at the ready for a parry.

His opponent's hook shot out at knee level, to knock Wufei's legs out from under him. Wufei leapt back. Carver's blows were still probing, looking for an opening, but at the same time he was forcing Wufei back towards the guardrail of the hanging platform, towards the empty space and the abysmal plunge into the under-level of Kropotkin. He'd already reduced Wufei's range and space by a dozen square feet.

Wufei weaved back a couple of steps, voluntarily boxing himself in a bit more...then he plunged forward. Carver's weapon scythed out, tried to catch him, but it whistled above Wufei's back. Wufei had lunged very low, taking advantage of their height difference, one hand hitting the ground and helping him tumble and get to his feet again before Carver could adjust his strike.

If he'd been in better shape, the move might have given him a short shot at Carver's back. But it took him a precious second or two to catch his balance, and Carver was amazingly fast for someone that big. Wufei was back on the defensive, but with over half the hanging platform behind him now.

Carver grimly began herding him towards the distant guardrail again. And why not? It was a good strategy. He'd either wing Wufei with one of his long, vicious swings, or he'd corner the Preventer, or he'd simply wear him out. In any event, Carver was going to win.

Wufei let himself stagger a bit, a tempting target...When Carver swung at him, Wufei grabbed the bent end of his own hook in his free hand and parried. He took the blow of Carver's weapon against the shaft of his own, bracing both arms against the shock. Carver's eyes widened. Wufei jerked down with his hook, snagging the shaft of Carver's weapon with the U of his own and pulling away, trying to rip it from Carver's grasp.

Then he barely dodged a massive punch to the gut.

Carver leaned forward and shoved his weapon against Wufei's. Wufei went flying straight back. With an instinctive flick of the wrist, he managed to disengage their hooks even as he stumbled, or he'd have been brought up short by the grip strapped to his hand, and then he'd have been at Carver's mercy.

He hit the deck hard, and rolled to his feet with more difficulty this time. His head was spinning. Cold prickles ran down his spine. If that punch had connected...Damn it, that freak was fast.

Carver moved forward at a prudent pace, he'd obviously reevaluated Wufei's skill and speed yet again. But he must have also realized the extent of Wufei's injuries. Now it was just a matter of wearing the Preventer down until Carver could finish him off.

Wufei took a few steps back. He knew Carver's advance was pushing him into a corner again, but he needed time, just a few seconds...It was the way Carver had used the hook for the two blows he'd aimed at Wufei, that was what had caught his attention and sent his warrior's instincts racing to formulate a strategy.
Carver's grip was like steel. Wufei would not get that hook from him without weakening him first. The man's greater reach was like an impenetrable wall around him. But that punch, and the way he held his hook, were revealing. If Wufei had had the opportunity Carver had just had, he'd have kicked rather than punched, and broken Carver's knee. Carver was not trained as fully in the martial arts, and it looked like he'd only used a machete before, never a staff or tonfa. Carver was concentrating on what he thought was the killing part of the long metal hook: the bent metal end. Wufei's use of his weapon had caught Carver by surprise (though damn had he ever recovered fast...)

The thoughts and conclusions darted through Wufei's mind in a couple of seconds, more impressions than actual formulated analysis. He had a plan now. It was a gamble, and a dangerous one, but Carver was as good as Wufei remembered; the greater gamble would be to continue probing that strong defense, dodging those vicious blows and waiting for an opening that might not occur before Wufei was too weak to capitalize on it.

Wufei went from edging backwards to a full-swinging attack in a fraction of a second. Carver's eyes widened in surprise, but his well-trained body was already falling into a parry-attack stance.

Wufei pressed. Speed was the key here, he could not allow Carver time to think, only react. He hammered at Carver's wrist with the shaft of his hook, then whisked the weapon around and slammed it down towards Carver's thigh when his opponent jerked his arm out of the way.

Wufei dodged one counterstrike and attacked again, staying on the balls of his feet-

Carver grunted and threw a sideways swipe with the hook, right to left, just to get Wufei to step back and fall into the defensive again. The gesture was confident; he knew there'd be no openings for Wufei to exploit, as Carver's range was greater. He knew he had the advantage.

Now!

Instead of falling back, Wufei braced himself and threw up his left arm in a parry.

In that sliver of a moment, he actually saw Carver's eyes widen with anticipated victory.

The sharp end of the metal hook slammed into the flesh of Wufei's upper left arm. It hurt more than he thought it would, pulsing agony as the muscle tetanized around the intruding spoke of metal. But Wufei was ready, he'd expected it, and his body had been primed to carry through the next move regardless. Through vision filling with black splotches, he took another half step forward and punched Carver right in the jaw with the heel of his right hand.

The skill he'd acquired from his lifelong training gave the blow a deadly accuracy; the weight of the unused meat hook in his hand added venom. Carver's head snapped back with a sharp crack.

Wufei immediately slammed his hook into Carver's wrist on the downswing of his punch. It connected with a meaty thud. Carver's hook jerked in the muscles of Wufei's arm- pain! - then the flesh was ripped again as Carver, still staggering from the vicious punch, lost his grip on the wooden handle.

Agony hit Wufei like 10Gs of acceleration and his vision went black.

He was on his knees. A pounding heartbeat and darkness filled his mind.

A metallic clang nearby, sound dopplered by layers of shock. That'd be his enemy's weapon hitting the ground...Wufei tore himself out of the darkness by sheer strength of will. If he didn't-...if he-

He'd promised.
Air rasped in his lungs. Wufei blinked. He could suddenly see again.

The scene before him was like a snapshot, flat, lifeless and unreal. Carver was leaning forward, eyes barely focused, blood gushing from his mouth where his teeth had scored his tongue. He was reaching for the fallen hook on the ground.

In what felt like slow-motion, Wufei struck out with his own hook, batting Carver's arm away. Then he swung up with his weapon and caught Carver full on the chest. It wasn't much of a blow - Wufei was still in shock - but it knocked Carver back. The bigger man landed back down on the ground with a thump, still reeling from the initial punch.

Wufei could see more clearly now, but it still felt like someone else getting to his feet, someone else turning towards the hook on the ground and kicking it as hard as he could. It skittered away, out of reach. Wufei turned without watching where it ended up. His weapon was already swinging.

Carver had scrambled to his knees. He saw it coming. He moved his head out of the way, but he was still dazed enough where he couldn't avoid the entire blow. It struck him on the shoulder, felling him to the ground again.

Wufei swung the hook underhand and upwards. He didn't even know which way the point was anymore, but he wasn't aiming to use the sharp part. The shaft of the hook socked Carver under the chin as his head sagged forward. It hurled him backwards, his skull snapping back.

Wufei swayed. He couldn't use his left arm; his entire left side was dead, distantly hot and throbbing. But the fight was over now. Just a few more seconds, and he could bind the injury.

Carver knew it was over too, but no fear stained the brown eyes. They'd gone completely flat, barely human in the bloodstained, bruised face. His gaze was fixed and staring, as if he could only see one path before him, the one he'd chosen to the end. Dead men had eyes like that.

He staggered to one knee and tried to dodge Wufei's next strike, but the two blows to the head had taken too great a toll. He couldn't stay upright.

Wufei hit him hard on the shoulder again. Heard/felt something give under the metal.

Carver fell back, rolled onto the uninjured side, tried to get out of range. He was heading circuitously towards his weapon, which had slid to a halt near the edge of the platform. There was no hope in that action, it was nothing but an automatic attempt, like choreographed steps in a mock battle whose outcome was already decided.

Wufei followed him, ignoring the sensations in his body, the growing weight of the hook in his hand. He let Carver go for the weapon at a scurrying crawl because he knew what he'd do then, and it was as good an ending as any.

Someone was shouting off to the right...Shadows flickered around him, but they stayed out of his mental battle space, so he didn't track them too closely. All his attention was on Carver, who was trying to close his fingers around the handle of his weapon. Wufei had broken the man's clavicle and maybe his wrist as well.

Wufei used his left hand, and, with an effort that forced admiration, rose to his feet. He had to know what was coming...but then again, it was an easy way out for him as well.

Wufei spun around on his left leg and kicked Carver high up on the chest, hurling him backward. Carver's hips hit the guardrail of the platform behind him, but the force Wufei had applied was too great and aimed too high. The metal barrier couldn't stop Carver from pitching out over it and into
Wufei walked to the railing, automatically making sure. Carver could have grabbed a handhold. He saw only darkness leading down into the under-level below Kropotkin. Far below, among the storage tanks and crates, would be the broken body of a Blade whose name Wufei had never actually learned.

Good. Carver might not have deserved the small compassion of a relatively quick death; maybe getting slowly ripped apart with a meat hook was some form of justice for his victims. It wasn't Wufei's justice, though.

He glanced at his left arm for the first time since Carver's hook had dealt its damage. Looked ugly. The puncture wound itself wouldn't have been too bad compared to other injuries in Wufei's violent past, but the blows and tugs had ripped the hole bigger and chewed up the triceps. It was bleeding like hell, but not enough to kill him. Probably. A couple of days in a regen unit and a few weeks of rest and reeducation and-

Wufei was on his knees, gagging. A pair of boots appeared in his graying field of vision. They were familiar. Just the sight of them made the pain a bit more bearable.

...kept my promise, Duo...

Then his arm hurt a whole hell of a lot as hands that could be a mite gentler applied pressure and dealt with the small hemorrhage.

Duo's voice, one long agitated diatribe, pierced the fading tinnitus in Wufei's ears. "Fuck what a stupid stunt I can't believe you'd do that you could have taken him without doing that or you could have fucking well let me fight him instead, what a fucking mess, if you bleed out on me-"

"I won't," Wufei sighed. His whole left side was an aching throb, but his head was clearing again.

"Maxwell!"

"Get the hell away from us, Mako." A knife sliced through the wrapping on Wufei's right hand, freeing him from the hook. The metal slipped through his limp fingers and hit the platform with a ringing thud.

"Maxwell! The situation-"

"You're going to be fine," Duo said, inspecting the dressing he'd improvised from Wufei's ripped-up shirt and boxing tape. "It's not bleeding enough to kill you, anyway. No, stay down-"

Wufei slowly got to his feet. "I'm okay."

"You won't be for long, idiot. That's still bleeding. Jesus, won't you-"

"Maxwell!" Mako jerked Duo around by the shoulder. "Rav needs you!"

Wufei had thought it was his heartbeat ringing savagely in his ears, as shock, stress and adrenaline finally had their way with him. But it wasn't. As if Carver's death had been a catalyst, the intently single-minded crowd had erupted into small knots of fighting. People shouted, some screamed. There was a concerted movement away, but there were also tides of people flowing into the Esplanade to join in the fray, hampering escape. It didn't look like a riot; the violence was too scattered, turned inwards on itself instead of on a figure of authority. But it didn't look pretty.
"What's going on?" Wufei croaked.

"Some guys have finally figured things out and want answers," Duo replied, carelessly freeing himself from Mako's grasp without even looking around. "Others will always stand by Morgenstern, whatever he's done. And some bruisers out there are always two seconds and a punch away from blowing a fuse anyway. At least they're not heading straight to Lao Tzu with Morgenstern at the helm."

"It could still go that way," Mako said tightly, eyeing the mob.

"Yeah, it could," Duo answered, curt and uncaring. He slipped Wufei's uninjured arm over his shoulder and walked away from Rav's henchman as if that was all he cared to discuss. Mako muttered something and rejoined Ravachol, who was on the edge of the platform, staring bleakly out into the crowd.

Morgenstern was nowhere to be seen; he'd taken his men and dispersed into the huddle of Kropotkin citizens, fanning the flames where he could. Wufei wondered distractedly what Morgenstern had felt when his Blade had taken that plunge.

"Duo...we have to..." Wufei looked at the crowd's movements helplessly. This wasn't a riot. This wasn't something a Preventer had ever seen before. It looked like a barroom brawl, spread over the size of a sector. It looked like the start of a revolution, but with a thousand separate sides. He didn't even know how to begin to defuse this situation.

Then Duo was taking him down the ramp and he could no longer see the boiling crowd, only a group of Rav's men surrounding Babka, Gilla and a few of the older Makhno citizens, all tense and worried. The younger ones who'd shown up to defend Wufei were no longer present. Either they'd made it out on their own with the wave of other escapees who didn't feel up to this fight, or else they'd chosen a side and joined in.

"Wufei, you're gonna be pissing mad at me for this," Duo said. "Though the way I see it, you owe me for that stupid duel you agreed to."

Wufei glanced at him in confusion. "Huh?"

For answer, Duo propped him up against Gilla's chair. "I want you to go to the clinic with Babka, Gilla and anybody else who'll come."

"I'm okay," Wufei said. He felt a bit light-headed, and the pain was nibbling away at whatever reserves he still had, but- "I'll stay with you. You need me to watch your back."

"You'd be more a danger to me than anything else," Duo pointed out bluntly, "and in your current shape, you can barely watch yourself. You did your bit. You helped us draw Morgenstern's fangs. Now go to the hospital. It's neutral ground, nobody will harm you there. I can't be worryin' about both of us. Here." A knife was pressed into the fingers of Wufei's right hand. "Make sure the others are okay on the way over."

Clever, putting an obligation like that on Wufei. The Preventer glanced around him. Gilla was looking at him in silence. Babka was next to him, but she was staring at the agitation in the Esplanade with distress and pain in her old eyes.

"Damn it," Wufei muttered, but he knew his lover had a point. If he went with Duo, somebody was bound to remember that Preventer picture. He'd be a lightning rod. Better make a getaway now while things were too volatile for anybody to think.
"I'll be fine," Duo said, sensing he'd won the argument. He made sure Wufei was leaning against Gilla's chair. "I know my way around, and Rav's gonna need a hand with this mess."

Wufei nodded, and closed his eyes tight as he felt a wave of nausea shake him. He was still dazed and dizzy. When he opened his eyes again, Duo was already gone; just like that, before Wufei could tell him anything more, or caution him, or threaten him with a thorough ass-kicking if he got himself hurt.

Wufei found himself numbly pushing a silent Gilla, though maybe it was Gilla who was moving his chair with his strong arms grasping the wheels and Wufei clinging to it to avoid falling over. Babka's hand was on the chair's other handle. Some of their friends were behind them and others up ahead, making their way through the incoming crowd, skirting the heart of the agitation.

Marta Bernstein was with them. Wufei stared at her dully, his mind still too confused to fully analyze her presence here. He'd thought she'd join with Rav's men and fight. She was holding a thick cudgel, but it dangled from her fingers. She was crying; one tear trickled down her face set in an unreadable mask, then, a minute later, another one. She didn't speak to him while their small group navigated through the growing mob, or in the echoing hallways outside of Kropotkin, or during the long trip through a disturbed Freeport to the hospital complex. Nobody said anything, except for Babka. She stood on the shuttle platform (before they realized that somebody had cut the power in the tunnel, and they'd have to make their way on foot) and said: "I'm glad you're okay, Wufei."

Freeport didn't have a regen unit, to Wufei's absolute lack of surprise. He made do with analgesics, a local anesthetic and micro-suture repairs to the muscle by a harried surgeon. Wufei knew that with that kind of fix for this injury, he would lose mobility in the arm unless he had corrective surgery on the Outside. But that was so far in the future, it could have been another age and another universe. Wufei had more immediate concerns.

The doctor's hurry told Wufei that other casualties were flooding into the clinic. Despite Duo's assurance that he'd 'done his bit', Wufei's sense of failure was eating away at him.

The nurse finished his bandage, checked his bruises and was talking about mild concussion when a Red Band appeared. He had nothing to say to Wufei; he dragged the nurse aside and they conferred for a short while. Ten minutes later, Wufei was led out of the wards and into the nurse's lounge, and the Red Band took up guard duty in front of the door. It wasn't clear if he was there to stop Wufei from leaving or to protect him from potential reprisals. Possibly both.

The coffee machine in the corner hummed as the minutes, then the hours, passed. Wufei stared at it blindly as he tried to organize his thoughts, come up with possible plans, and accept the failures that had brought him here.

At least he'd done something right: he'd made sure his friends from Makhno had made it to the clinic with him. He'd seen Babka before the Red Band took him away; she was in a large room - once a ward, now getting set up as triage - and working at setting out sheets and supplies on a long table. She hadn't seen him. She'd looked alright, and he was ready to bet she was going to stay here and help the staff with the wounded until the crisis was over. Assuming it was going to end any time soon. He hadn't seen Gilla, or Marta, or Dannie, or any of the others who'd come with them to the
The clinic. He hoped they'd stayed somewhere around the compound or sector. He wasn't sure how safe Makhno would be for them right now.

No sign of Duo.

The lounge was comfortable, with a camp bed set up in a curtained corner for nurses and interns to grab a rest, but Wufei would have preferred to wait in triage, to see if someone was bringing in his lover at any point. The doctors here wouldn't even know to warn him if Duo was brought in, and Wufei couldn't inform them, that wouldn't be safe for Duo. So he waited.

The coffee machine muttered, warming up more water that no one was using. No nurse came in for its produce. Maybe they had another lounge, and they'd been told this one was off-limits by the Red Band guarding the door. Or maybe the flood of casualties was as bad as Wufei's pessimism suggested, and the nurses didn't have the time for coffee. There were eighty thousand people living in Freeport. This hospital had room for three thousand maximum, which was a stupidly low number, considering the population working in a high-risk environment. Maybe Freeport had contingency planning...

Wufei tried to meditate, sitting on the sagging couch with his wounded arm in a sling. He sought his focus, clearing his mind to react to any eventuality, but the pain of his injury and the dull throbbing in his abused body and sore head were distracting. He couldn't manage more than a light dazed state of trance. He felt so useless.

He could probably break out of here. However damaged he was, that Red Band would not be able to stop him, and everybody else was too busy by the sound of it. But if he left, he'd get himself killed, or assuming he was amazingly lucky and found Duo in the chaos, he'd get Duo killed, and that would be- that would be unthinkable.

In the distance outside the hospital, someone started shouting into a loudspeaker. Wufei got to his feet where he wobbled, momentarily light-headed. He went closer to a vent in one side of the windowless room, but he couldn't make out the words. Someone ran past the door to the lounge, but people had been running past it for the last three hours he'd been here, that was nothing new.

Ten minutes later, his surgeon showed up again. The man looked strained, but he was not yet panicking about the state of his colony as far as Wufei could tell.

"You're up? Didn't somebody tell you that you could use the bed?"

Wufei didn't glance at the bed the surgeon was gesturing at. He stared at the man with the most frustration he'd felt since Duo had put the collar around his neck along with all its restrictions. Chances were, this doctor knew who Wufei was now, and even if he didn't, he might not actually care if a Blade grabbed him by the shoulders and asked him what the hell was going on outside. But discipline was something bred into Wufei's bones, and there was always the fear that betraying himself to the wrong person could harm Duo. He stayed silent by an exertion of sheer will that left him swaying slightly.

"Good god, sit, sit," the surgeon muttered, shoving Wufei back into the sagging settee. "Here, let me look at this. Hmm...no abnormal swelling. I bet it hurts though."

Wufei glanced at the wound the surgeon had revealed. He had massive black and blue splotches spreading from shoulder to elbow, the wound was puffy and straining against the stitches, blood and fluids had seeped into the bandages. And yes, it hurt, fancy that.

The surgeon taped the dressing back on. "We'll have a nurse change this in a couple of hours. Or
more. Sorry, we're a bit busy."

Wufei gave him a Look. The air was about to sizzle with his frustration, and no-communication tradition be damned but surely the surgeon could feel it.

The doctor gestured reassuringly. "Freeport is holding together, don't worry. I've not been following the news-net, but as far as I can tell, things are going fairly well considering the circumstances. We've not run out of beds yet. I have to go."

The surgeon quickly washed his hands in the lounge sink. Wufei stared at his back, chilled not only by the fact that Freeport had already seen thousands of casualties, enough to threaten to fill up the hospital's wards, but that the doctor still felt that this was pretty good 'considering the circumstances'.

"The nurse will give you a second shot of immuno-boosters when she changes the dressing, as well as something for the pain. Please lie down now. If you collapse, that just gives us more work," the doctor pointed out, already half out the door. "I'm surprised you're still standing. Don't worry, I've been assured by the Elder of our sector himself that you're safe here and that you won't be taken anywhere against your will, so relax, okay?"

Wufei didn't say anything, but he signaled his understanding and acceptance of the reassurance by going to sit down on the bed. He'd noted, through the open door behind the doctor, that two more Red Bands had rejoined the first. What that meant...he no longer knew.

The doctor had a point, though. Wufei curled up on the bed, making sure the scalpel he'd reflexively palmed during his surgery earlier was within easy reach. Then he forced himself to shut down and rest. He might need his energy later.

He dozed lightly, waking at each sound of footsteps in the hall. A nurse came in to change his dressing and give him a couple of shots, but she said nothing and didn't even look him in the eye. When she left, Wufei went back to sleep with the mental discipline he'd cultivated most of his life and particularly during the war. This was starting to feel like those times all over again.

In a strange way, that association of ideas reassured him. He and Duo had survived one war already, it would take more than a riot and an anarchist conspiracy to bring down Shinigami. Wufei had to use patience as a weapon and wait until he could act, as he had in the Lunar Base prison.

Wufei fell asleep and dreamt of death and war.

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The door opened, waking him instantly. It had been over fifteen hours since Carver had taken that final plunge to his death. Wufei felt a bit better physically, though his wounds were aching worse now.

He swung his feet off the bed, eyes on the newcomer. It hadn't been the man he was waiting for, the one he desperately wanted to see, but it wasn't an execution squad either. It was Elder Braun.

"Is Duo alright?" Wufei asked the instant he was sure Braun was alone.

"Maxwell?" Braun rubbed his eyes. "Don't know, to tell you the truth. Probably. He has a knack for survival."
Wufei took in Braun's appearance: unshaven, pale with exhaustion, eyes reddened, looking even older than when Wufei had first seen him. The jacket he was wearing was rumpled and missing half its buttons, as if someone had grabbed it and wrenched.

"How bad is it?" Wufei asked.

"Not as bad as it could have been," Braun answered, blinking at Wufei. The neon of the nurse's lounge seemed to be bothering him. "It's not over yet, we still have wounded coming in. So far we've accounted for two hundred dead, give or take, and I didn't see the latest reports on the injured. But the worst hasn't happened, so we're all good."

"You must have thousands of casualties already, what the hell do you people consider worse than that?" Wufei asked, irrationally irritated that Braun had the same kind of strange composure as the doctor, and also that he'd not had any news on Duo.

"Worse? Let me see: Elders being involved, high-jacking the council and spreading the unrest. Someone getting hold of the self-destruct codes and using that as leverage. Sabotage of the Command Centre or Air Control. Kamikaze strike by a ship into the colony- oh, I'm sorry, Agent Chang, didn't you realize how close to the edge we are here in Freeport?" the Elder added sardonically as Wufei stared at him in horror.

"But-but what are you doing?!"

"Me personally? Nothing. A lot of things have come to light in the last few hours. As a consequence, I have one last duty left to perform and then I've been relieved of my function as Elder," Braun said pleasantly. "It seems I'm looking at that long-postponed retirement at last. I will present the facts and the reasons for my actions to the citizens of my sector in a few days, when things are a bit less noisy, and they will decide if they still trust me as their representative or if they'd rather kick me out."

"I'm sorry," Wufei muttered.

Braun sniffed as if Wufei's apology insulted him and the resolution that had pushed him to take the risk of giving Duo his support in the first place. Braun must have had a powerful reason to let a Preventer on board, because it had been obvious to Wufei when they'd met over Brindlow's body that Braun hadn't liked him or the necessity of his presence. Whatever those reasons, the Elder was apparently willing to stand by them and face his people's judgment without having a Preventer worry about him.

"The last duty concerns you," Braun said abruptly, dismissing the cloud hanging over his head and bringing it to bear on Wufei's instead.

Wufei waited with the grim resolve with which he'd flown suicide runs in Shenlong, ready for anything.

"We have a favor to ask of you."

Anything but that...

"Favor? From me? What...do you need my help identifying Breakers- Morgenstern's people? I've seen many of them, I could-"

"Oh no, Agent Chang. We don't do things quite like that here." Braun spoke sardonically but Wufei detected an undertone of frustration the Elder was trying to keep to himself. "Some of the people behind this little plot have proudly come forward and declared their support for their leader; they will stand or fall with him. But the others, and I'm sure there are plenty, have stayed in the shadows until
they see which way the wind is blowing. If they're smart and have friends who still believe in them, chances are we'll never know who they were. I don't mind for those who were merely misguided. But for those who committed crimes against Freeport...Unfortunately, there's no mechanism here to prove such a crime, to bring them to account for their acts. They can disappear, or continue to live freely in their sector as long as they still have their credibility, and there's little I can do about it without solid proof. I'm too old to unearth clues or fight duels, and I've got my own problems."

Braun wandered over to the coffee machine and grabbed one of the nurse's mugs. Finding it clean enough, he hit the button and sighed at the liquid splashed against glass.

"There's still fighting in Kropotkin; it's been worse there, as you might expect. I would never have thought it of Alan. Never. I've known the man for over fifteen years, and I might not have liked him a lot, but I would have trusted him with all our lives. He'd have had my vote for Elder if we'd held that election three days ago. Maybe it is time I retired..."

"So the situation is resolving itself?" Wufei asked, startled; Braun made it sound as if the worst was already over, and now there were only loose ends to tie.

"Yes and no. After Ravachol and Maxwell managed to block an outright revolution, Morgenstern tried one last gamble. He walked into the Council of his own free will and asked to be heard over a general news-net broadcast, to ask Freeport to decide if they would support him."

"You allowed this?"

"Yes, of course. Until he's been proven to have committed a crime against our community, he's a free man; he could do what he wanted. As an important member of his sector who was ready to report a serious problem, with friends behind him and vouching for him, he had the right to access our systems. The Council of Elders approved his request to have his plea broadcast to the colony's news-net. It was the fastest way of getting all the facts out to everyone and put a momentary halt to the unrest," Braun added, when Wufei stared at him completely flummoxed. "He- I'm sorry, did you want some coffee?"

"No," Wufei snapped. "What happened?"

"He lost."

Braun took a sip and made a face. "Blah, what kind of filter did they use, a Sweeper's old sock...? Yes, Alan gave quite the speech. He made a good case, but in the end, the people voted against him. Every-"

"You had time to organize a vote?! In the middle of a riot?"

"Easiest way to end said riot," Braun pointed out. "And the mechanics for a colony-wide referendum are already in place in every sector, linked to the Lao Tzu computer, and can be used within the hour."

"Of course," Wufei muttered, rubbing his temples with his good hand.

"Yes, 'of course'," said Braun with a certain amount of arrogant pride in the system that had just stripped him of his functions.

"So the riot's over?"

"Not by a long stretch. It's no longer a riot per se, but there's infighting in some sectors. It's only loosely related to Alan's plot now, and is more about fundamental beliefs in Anarchy and what it
means. Some of it is just brawling and settling of old scores while the attention of the colony is elsewhere. There’s fighting, but apart from the odd duel, there are no longer many fatalities...Besides, there's funny rumors running around that's dampening the unrest. Rumors that the Preventers are about to send in a peace-keeping force-"

"We aren't."

"I know, but a lot of citizens are gearing up to defend the colony instead of wasting their time arguing ideology. Another rumor is that anyone who supports Morgenstern will garner the enmity of the Trolls, and I'm afraid that threat was a lot more effective than anything you people might do."

Wufei laughed briefly, a tattered sound, and then he frowned. "Is Fred alright?"

Braun paused with his cup halfway to his lips. "Who?"

"A Troll- ...someone who was with me and Duo. He was injured; we were trying to get him out of the under-level when I was caught. Never mind, you probably wouldn't know. You really haven't heard anything about Duo?"

"No, sorry. But that's good news." Braun's voice had gathered a thin layer of sympathy; he was looking at Wufei with a bit more consideration than before. "If something had happened, I'd have probably heard of it. I have my sources where young Maxwell is concerned."

That wasn't much of a reassurance.

"So," Wufei said after a few seconds of silence in which his wounds and his worries ached at him, "the citizens voted Morgenstern down..."

"Yes. In the end, they had a choice. Morgenstern tried to convince them that it was their duty to spread Anarchy across space, for their own safety and for the liberation of the oppressed everywhere, etc, yes, I can see you know the kind of speech. Many who live here believe deeply in our way of life, Agent Chang. Although right now we're seeing the ugly side of it, we're also seeing the inbuilt mechanisms of self-control that is stopping this from turning into out-and-out madness, without having to bear the continual presence of a police force that could become an instrument of repression at any time."

"'Without Authority, there could be no worse violence than that of Authority under existing conditions'," Wufei muttered, thinking of the framed words on Babka's wall.

That earned him another considering look. Then Braun seemed to dismiss a question he was about to ask and took a sip of coffee.

"Morgenstern really believed he could win this; he really believed there were enough people ready to help him spread anarchy throughout the solar system, especially when he waved the fear of a Preventer strike around. But in the end, the majority voted, at seventy-one-percent with a ninety-three percent turnout of citizens, to not form a Freedom Committee with Morgenstern at the helm, and to leave whatever control Freeport can be said to have in the hands of the Elders. You can see this result in one of two ways, Agent Chang. Either Freeport has the wisdom to realize that true Anarchy cannot be brought about by tricks, by violence, by imposing it on other colonies unless they strive for it themselves...or that in the end, Freeport cares only about Freeport, and the rest of you lot can go to hell as far as we're concerned; if you want to live under a tyrannical regime, that's your choice."

Wufei laughed again. It was a brittle sound and it hurt his head.

"You don't look too well," Braun commented. "I hope you can walk."
"Ah yes, the favor," Wufei said. "I don't get it, what the hell do you think I can do now?"

"Arrest Morgenstern."

Wufei blinked and steadied himself against the frame of the bed he was sitting on. "I...I beg your pardon?"

"It was his choice." Braun shrugged. It obviously would not have been his own. "I'm sorry, I've confused you. I forgot you haven't been hanging off our news channels like we have. He had a choice, you see, once he was voted down. I mean, he'd virtually broadcast over the entire colony that he'd conspired to pull us all into an ideological war, even though he didn't put it in quite those terms. We don't have any laws and rules, Chang, but-"

"Traditions," Wufei muttered dazedly, wondering if the nurse might come in soon with another one of those shots.

"-but something like that is still considered a no-no." Braun had the caustic levity of someone who'd accepted that he no longer had a battle to fight. "So he had a choice. He could go back to Kropotkin, or- oh yes, we'd have let him. Don't look so surprised. We don't have the right to arrest and hold people against their will; not unless we have proof they've committed a crime against the colony, and the mechanism to gather and present that proof are rusty or nonexistent. Most things are settled at the sector level, and by popular decision. So yes, he could have walked out of Lao-Tzu. Once back on his home turf, he could have started a sector-wide riot, until someone cut his throat or the colony tipped off the edge. I'm glad to say he did not choose that path; I had not misjudged him that badly. Another choice would have been to present himself for the council's judgment. We would have convoked him there sooner or later anyway, as soon as we managed to get the facts, put a case together and present it to the colony. That would end in exile or getting spaced. Or he could choose the final option. To answer for his crimes Outside, where he committed most of them, in front of a Preventer Tribunal."

"He chose that? You have to be joking. He's an anarchist, he has no respect for our institutions. Why did he-..." Wufei had met Morgenstern, and he felt sure that that man was not afraid of death the Elder Council's judgment might have earned him.

"You'll have the opportunity to ask him, since that's the favor. The sloop Euclid is docking at Bay 49 in three hours. There's a small Preventer taskforce aboard. We would like you to escort Morgenstern aboard and arrest him once he's out of Freeport territory."

Wufei stared.

"It's the best way. And his choice. Besides, it gets both you and him out of the colony, out of danger and out of ways of reprisal and more agitation. The rest...the rest of this is Freeport's business, Agent. Not yours. Please be ready to leave in two hours."

Braun put down his cup and turned...but then he stopped. He hesitated, head tilting one way then another as if arguing with himself. Finally he fished around in his pocket and produced a pen. He grabbed a medical notepad from the counter near the door, tore off a sheet and scribbled something on the back. He walked over to Wufei and handed it to him without looking him in the eye.

"Wufei glanced over the words and frowned. "I don't understand-"

Braun was already at the door. "It's a formality. A tradition, if you will. Keep it. Put it in your Preventer office and frame it. It'll be a conversation piece. I guess you can even say you've earned it. Yes, I guess you have."
There were still three Red Bands outside, but Braun appeared not to notice them. "I think I'll go see if they need help in the hospital cafeteria now, what with the influx of patients. I'm not needed anywhere else, my sector is fairly peaceful and in good hands. Besides, I used to work in the galley of a Sweeper frigate. Granted, that was forty years ago, but I bet I can still make better coffee than that. Good luck, Agent Chang. Thank you for the favor."

Wufei looked at the closed door in silence, then at the piece of paper. It was a suitably odd end to his time in Freeport.

He was leaving Freeport. He was leaving Duo, and he didn't even know if his lover was dead or alive. It was over. And all he had to show for it was a prisoner he'd done little to capture himself and a scribble on the back of a torn-off medical prescription.

Wufei folded the piece of paper up and put it in his pocket. It never occurred to him to throw it away, even though Braun might have meant it as a joke.
Chapter 34

"Anarchism has but one infallible, unchangeable motto, 'Freedom.' Freedom to discover any truth, freedom to develop, to live naturally and fully."

---Lucy Parsons

The two Red Bands took Wufei around to the docks the long way, through sectors on their night cycles. Wufei didn't know if they were just being prudent or if he really might get lynched if recognized. Better all around not to take any chances.

His internal map of Freeport told him they were also giving a wide berth to the sectors near Kropotkin. He saw no signs of damage in the zones they crossed, but graffiti had spread over the sector walls, argumentative in its typical Freeport way. Painted cries of 'Morgenstern was right!', 'The enemy is coming!' and 'Breakers are Anarchy!' were interspersed with condemnation and refutations. Wufei absently wondered when the word 'Breaker' had become known and adopted for Morgenstern's group. Was this a sign that Duo had been talking to people in this sector...? More likely it was the influence of the Troll King who had originally given them that name.

Wufei shifted his arm in its sling as they climbed a ramp to the docking bays. His injury ached, a throbbing pain worming its way past the analgesics. He didn't know what the next few days would hold, but hopefully he'd be able to get some regen-unit time for his injury. That would set it to rights, and give him time to meditate and help him over the inevitable psychological fallout from the battle, though it'd probably be some time before Wufei would be able to walk into a slaughterhouse or even a butcher's shop without some pretty nasty flashbacks.

There was nobody around in the docking ring when they arrived, no dockhands, customs or mechanics, nothing but a dozen of Red Bands scattered at various entry points into the docking bay area. Two of them were standing on either side of Morgenstern.

The man looked uninjured. The strict, utilitarian grey of the plain Freeport citizen he customarily wore was rumpled, no more. He looked older than before, he'd obviously not slept since Wufei had seen him last, but the blue eyes were still bright and combative as they fixed scornfully on Wufei.

"Chang. I bet this is quite the victory for you."

"Come along," was all Wufei said, grabbing Morgenstern by the upper arm and nudging him towards a corridor with 'Bays 40-60' crudely stenciled on its side.

"Thank you, gentlemen," Morgenstern amiably told his previous escort. The two burly Red Bands shifted and looked uncomfortable.

Then Morgenstern was looking at Wufei again.

"What, no cuffs?" he asked in apparent consternation.

Wufei had no intentions of playing the Breaker's little mind games all the way back to Earth. He just marched him off in the direction of Bay 49.

They passed boxes and crates stacked haphazardly - and against all spaceport security conventions - on either side of the corridor. These docks were reserved for small official trade ships with cargo
necessary for Freeport's survival, so they weren't quite as gloomy as the dock where Duo had berthed Scythe. They were well lit and an effort had been made to paint them. Unfortunately this only highlighted the bared electrical wiring, the hissing, leaking pipes running beneath grids under their feet, the tinge of age and the dinginess of neglect, which an army of overworked volunteers was constantly battling against.

"I overheard one of my jailors mention that the Euclid is docking right now," Morgenstern said, matching Wufei's stride without a shadow of hesitation. "I'm surprised the Elders allowed it. Too scared to think, I suppose. At least they're not letting any of the Preventer troops on board. Oh wait, they already have, haven't they. I was surprised to hear Braun was involved with your presence here. I would never have thought it of the man."

"Funny," Wufei muttered despite his best intentions not to respond to any baiting, "that's what he said about you."

"It just goes to show what a bit of fear and authority can do, even here. That's how you people always win: fear, and being the lesser of two evils. Order and Security. Isn't that right, Chang? Why do I even bother, the system owns you. You're the one telling the people what to do and what to think in exchange for your protection."

"No, Morgenstern, I don't." Wufei could hear the own bitterness in his voice and didn't bother to hide it; he had too many other concerns. "It's a democracy out there. I don't tell them what to do or think. Television does."

"Hah, your media, controlled by the state and their higher interests-" Morgenstern was off again.

But we don't control it, Wufei thought wearily, tuning the anarchist out. We don't have to. The media control themselves, and feed the people what the ratings say they want, which is saccharine forgetfulness...

"I had hopes for you, Chang. And for Maxwell. I wanted you both on my side." Morgenstern was still talking as they made their way through a loading area. "Oh, I was pretty sure I knew why you were here. But I tried talking to you, and show you the way. I still hoped that, with your past, I could have won you over- oh, speak of the devil, look who's here. Now I never would have thought he was capable of betraying Freeport. I am-"

Wufei didn't hear the rest. He'd followed Morgenstern's glance in time to see Duo dodge a grab by an irritated Red Band near one of the far entrances to the docking ring.

Wufei felt dizzy with relief, though that might have been the cocktail of painkillers, fatigue, injury and release from tension. He shoved Morgenstern into a corner even as the man was saying something sarcastic and completely unimportant about Duo and his choice of sides.

"Stay here," Wufei ordered him absently. The Breaker huffed behind him, but Wufei paid him no mind as he made a beeline towards Duo.

"-just going to say bye to my friend there, don't worry, citizen, yeah, no, I know I'm armed but I need that- look, he knows me, right? He's coming over to say hi, so thanks for being watchful, mate, but we're fine." Duo detached himself from the Red Band and ran up a ramp to meet Wufei on the docking ring.

"Ta-da!" he warbled just as Wufei reached him.

Wufei blinked. He was looking straight at his own sword, thrust in front of his face.
"Bet ya didn't think you'd see this again! It's not been damaged, at least I don't think so, this crack in the lacquer looks old already."

Wufei gently brushed the sword aside and gripped Duo's shoulder, interrupting him. "Are you okay?" he asked, checking him over for injuries. Duo looked dead tired but otherwise unharmed. Then again, he could operate a Gundam with a couple of broken bones, so it was hard to tell.

"Me? Better than you, buddy." Duo had been running the same check, eyes going over Wufei's face, and the sling and bandages peeping from behind the fall of the jacket Wufei had slipped over his shoulder, unable to put his injured arm through the sleeve. Wufei knew he looked like death warmed over, but he judged that he'd gotten off lightly. When he'd seen his ID posted up on that building back in Kropotkin, he'd fully expected to be dead by now.

"I'm okay," Wufei said, his voice hoarse and uneven. His mind had been so full of concern for Duo, wondering how to get a fix on him and his status before he had to leave, that he felt suddenly at a loss. "I'm glad to see you. Was it bad?"

"Nah!" Duo answered with an expansive gesture and a tired smirk. Wufei translated that as 'yeah, pretty bad, but it could have been a lot worse'. That seemed to be everybody's opinion.

Wufei found the fingers of his good hand closing over his sword as Duo poked it at him. The sheath felt familiar, its weight a part of his body. A small knot of regret loosened in Wufei's mind. He'd been infinitely more worried about Duo, but he'd have mourned the loss of his sword later; they'd been through a lot together.

"I'd written it off," he said softly, staring down at the dark red lacquer. "Even if someone had found it in the under-sector or the sewers, I assumed they'd keep it. Where did you find it?"

"Oh, I didn't." Duo rubbed the back of his neck with a rueful smile. "Sorry, I didn't have time to look for it. But a Troll dropped it off just as I was heading back to the clinic to see where you were."

"Fred?" Wufei asked hopefully. Though the panicking Troll had left him for the Breakers, Wufei could hardly blame him, and he didn't like to think he had another innocent death on his head.

"No, Fred's disappeared. I haven't seen him since I left him in a tunnel to draw a Breaker patrol away from his location. He was gone by the time I doubled back. But since no Troll has come to ask me any questions about him, I'm pretty sure they found him. They take care of their own. No, I really don't know how they got your sword back or where. This Outer Troll just showed up, handed it to me and said: 'For your friend. Lesley says thanks.'"

"Lesley...?" Ah, the Troll who'd hidden her brother, Herb Spasson. Wufei remembered her as he'd seen her last, face tight with grief and directionless anger, pushing her brother's body out of the morgue and into the rendering room. She must have heard of Carver's death. She'd been asking for revenge-...

No, actually Lesley's primary concern had been 'why', Wufei remembered. She'd wanted answers, she'd wanted justice. Carver could have gotten himself killed at any point in the last few hours of fighting if Wufei hadn't done the honors. A wise woman would recognize that a dead body was just a dead body, particularly when she worked with them all day. But thanks to Wufei and Duo's interference, the reason why this had happened was now known. Wufei hoped she realized now how deep the Breaker conspiracy ran, and that, instead of condemning her brother to death, her actions had in fact given him a few more days of life. His end had been inevitable once he'd helped Ferret get away. Knowing the reason behind his death might help her. Someone who hadn't lost a loved one to a crime could not easily measure how important that 'why' was for closure. An investigation
and a court of law were supposed to produce those answers Outside, though they were far from infallible; in Freeport, those answers might never materialize at all, or they'd trickle down the grapevine lost in the middle of rumors and fallacies.

Wufei looked down at his ancestor's sword and hoped Lesley at least had found her answers.

Duo watched him loop the sword's strap over his good shoulder. "Well..." His eyes drifted away from Wufei's face. "So, there he is, heh?"

Wufei glanced behind him, following Duo's gaze, to see Morgenstern where he'd left him, arms crossed bad-temperedly.

"You just parked him there?" Duo asked with faint humor. "What if he wanders off?"

"Where would he go?" Wufei answered. "There isn't any place in Freeport who'll have him right now, except perhaps Kropotkin. Or maybe those friends in Mooncurse and Bakunin he'd deny having, the ones who did his dirty work. But he'll not run away. This is his choice."

"Yeah, I heard that. That's how I figured out where you'd be. Funny, never would have pegged him for a coward who'd give up rather than fight and face the threat of getting spaced." Duo looked puzzled.

"I don't think that's why he decided to surrender himself."

Duo gave him a questioning look.

"He wants a forum."

Duo tilted his head to one side as if to hear better. "No, still not getting it..." he mused.

"He's failed here," Wufei elaborated with a last glance back at Morgenstern. "Freeport didn't follow him. So he'll try again during his trial in Luxemburg. He'll be a martyr, a flag-bearer for Anarchy and the freedom of Space, fighting against Earth's oppression. His lawyers will make sure he's given plenty of exposure. Maybe Space will listen, even if Freeport didn't. He still has his network of terrorist and agitators on the Outside. We'll have to keep an eye on him..."

"Hmm...yeah, that sounds more plausible than him rolling over and playing dead."

"I know how his kind thinks," Wufei admitted, almost to himself. "Treize was like that too. Some people will fight and die for what they believe in, but his kind will go one step further: they'll murder, subvert, manipulate, cheat and destroy for their cause. With eyes wide open, counting each death, each stain on the soul. The absolute faith in their beliefs is frightening, and gives them a strange sort of honor that somehow cannot be stained whatever their actions. They don't care that history will remember them as monsters as long as they can shape the future." Wufei shrugged, but he didn't feel that casual about it, and he couldn't dismiss the memories evoked that easily.

Duo smiled like a wolf. "If he wants to be a martyr, I'm all for it. I hope he ends up doing twenty in a jail in Luxemburg with a cell-mate named Big Marty who likes 'em old and respectable."

"He's got money on the Outside," Wufei said caustically. "He'll never see prison bars, or anything more rigorous than a holding cell. He'll be in and out of courtrooms until he dies. And that's only if the Preventers are lucky, because let's face it, it'll be hard to make much stick legally. Overall he's guilty as sin, but the lawyers will rip us apart on the details. What do we have to pin on him? He's never left Freeport, we lost Carver...Do you know where Ferret went?"
"No, but I'll be keeping my eyes open, and not just for Ferret," Duo said, a deadly promise in his eyes. "The info is out there, Chang. You guys will find it. Me and the other rat-catchers will help with the Freeport end, and he'll end up in that cell. You'll see."

Strange, the anarchist had more faith in the system than the Preventer did...The irony was bitter, but Wufei focused on something that was, to him, much more important than the ultimate dying ground of a would-be Liberator. "I don't think you should look into this matter anymore. You should concentrate on keeping your head low. I...Duo, just tell me, yes-or-no answer-"

"Oh, for Christ's sake-"

"-yes-or-no answer, are you really going to be okay here? You could-..." What? Join Wufei on the Euclid...?

Duo smiled, the small, honest one that Wufei was one of the rare people to see. "Well, to tell you straight, it's been dodgy, and it will be for a few weeks to come. But Ravachol and Braun have spilled everything they know, that's diffused the situation a bit. I'll have a few people who'll want to stick a knife in my back, but hey, that's nothing new. Most citizens are happy I poked around, stirred the shit and blew the cover off this thing. I'll be telling my pals in Makhno the truth. They'll be the judges. If they decide that they'd rather not know me anymore, then Ravachol said he'd put me up in Mooncurse. I got buddies over there. They're smugglers, they know what it's like living in that grey zone where things aren't as clear-cut as your proper anarchist likes to think it is. But...oh well, we'll see. I'm unkillable, though, so don't worry."

"Pardon me if I do worry," Wufei muttered. "Look, maybe you should take off for a few weeks in Scythe. You could go to the docks right now and wait there half a day so you aren't seen leaving at the same time as the Euclid-"

"Nah, Duo Maxwell don't turn tail and run. This is my home. Stop worrying about me. I don't need a Preventer escort any more than I need a nanny."

Wufei looked at the wide smirk on Duo's face and knew he would not be able to change his lover's mind.

In the silence that followed, the grating hum of a cranky ventilation unit sounded overly loud and intrusive. The Red Band at the bottom of the ramp was still glaring up at Duo with suspicion, and Wufei knew he had to leave. He felt nothing but resignation. He'd known this was going to happen sooner or later. So had Duo. They'd never lied to each other, or made promises they couldn't keep.

"So, this is where the road splits," Duo said with a crooked smile. He didn't try to hide the regret that darkened his eyes, like a parting gift, bittersweet.

"Yes. I'm glad we were able to walk the same path for a while. You honored me," Wufei said simply, and wondered slightly at himself. This was not something he'd have been able to say three months ago.

"Oh bullshit," Duo laughed, making horrified hand motions which he didn't mean.

There really wasn't much else to say. They might meet up again in the future, but that was too uncertain to make any plans or promises once more. The possibility was there, in the lines of fate and duty. Maybe their paths would cross again.

"The Red Band's getting hot down there," Duo said, scratching the back of his neck. He reached out and gave Wufei's good shoulder a gentle punch. "Take care," he said gruffly, without looking.
"Stay safe," Wufei told him as Duo turned and walked back down the ramp.

He watched Duo stride away without looking back, and Wufei wished he was at liberty to say what he felt. Once he'd fully figured it out...Probably best this way.

He turned back to Morgenstern, who was glaring at Duo's retreating back as if he couldn't believe that the man who'd helped bring him down couldn't even be bothered to come over and gloat.

"Let's go," muttered Wufei.

The hatch of the Euclides opened with a puff of expelled air as they approached it. Two Preventers, crisp uniforms discreetly covered by white freighter-pilot jackets, stood at the entrance. They both wrinkled their noses and coughed. Ah yes, Wufei reminded himself, the air: the Freeport atmosphere, rich and vivifying. It could probably wake the dead.

Morgenstern sailed past the two officers with a well-sculpted sneer on his patrician features. He was going to get a lot of practice doing that in the coming weeks and months. That look on his face would make a good background for a news bite between two advertisements on TV.

The sloop's airlock and corridor were so clean they looked aseptic. Wufei led Morgenstern without a word to the inner bay, and stopped.

"Ah, I see you have a reception committee ready," Morgenstern said. "Mr. Yuy, we meet again. And this must be Mr. Barton. I see you've all rallied to the call of your new masters. I should have realized. We never stood a chance, when the weapons we created to defend Space turned against us-"

"Mandelson, Himura, holding cell One. Charge him as soon as we leave Freeport space," Trowa said without even glancing his way.

The Breaker's jaw moved with helpless fury as he was hauled away by two Preventers without anybody looking all that interested. Wufei didn't watch him leave. Morgenstern would have his day, whatever good he thought it would do him.

"I'm glad to see you," Wufei said, smiling at his friends.

Trowa was the only one to nod a greeting, Heero and Sally were too busy examining him head to toe.

"Oh my god, he's gone native," Sally said weakly.

Wufei became excruciatingly conscious of his general appearance, his clothes and the blasted collar he'd completely forgotten to remove. "Snap out of it, Po," he grumbled, trying not to flush with embarrassment. "You've seen me undercover before."

"Never quite so dirty, though," Heero noted with what might have been a trace of humor. Or maybe not. He'd stopped looking at Wufei's clothes after that first once-over, his eyes were now on Wufei's arm, assessing the extent of the injury from the sling, the bandages and Wufei's posture.
"You have a point." Wufei scratched his loose hair. It felt like something was breeding in there. He hadn't washed in two days, and he'd been dragged through the sewers..."Do you think I could take a long shower on board before you arrest me?"

Sally's face went from incredulous to hurt. Wufei regretted his bluntness, but he was too tired to dance around the truth.

"I assume that's why you three are here. Just how bad is it?"

Sally glanced at Heero and Trowa. Wufei noted that she looked almost as tired as he was. "No more than usual. There's that mess on L2 with the governor. And a human rights group has made a complaint to the Regulations Committee in regards to the attack on the rioters' HQ. But you've weathered worse. We'll get this cleaned up in no time."

Wufei glanced at Heero.

"Internal Affairs are going to have a review on your dossier," his partner said without any attempt to soften the blow. "They didn't buy the 'holiday' excuse this time."

"Do they ever, except when it's to their advantage?" So that meant a charge of Dereliction of Duty at the least. Internal Affairs wouldn't have to dig very far into his records to unearth worse charges than that.

"You have absolutely nothing to worry about, Wufei," Sally said, and her eyes were hot and angry, a departure from the calm, levelheaded agent he was used to. I must really be in trouble, Wufei thought. "Une will do her usual juggling. She owes you that much and more. And if they need a straw trial, fine! I talked to Quatre on the way here. He wanted to come with us, but he's working with Une to track down this Morgenstern's money, and make sure we're not looking at a rash of riots and terrorism by the end of next week. But he told me he has the best lawyers in the solar system on retinue, and if those upper crust ex-Romefeller bastards try to attack you for doing your job, they won't know what hit them."

Some of those 'bastards' were actually well meaning Preventers who saw this whole thing as just one more crazy stunt by Une's notorious loose cannon, breaking the law - and bones as well - to pursue his own vigilante version of Justice. These were good men, and they'd see this as no more than the opportunity to finally put an end to an unstable element in their midst. But that wasn't how Sally was about to look at it.

"It's the politics behind this that's infuriating," Sally added, fingers tapping her holstered gun as if she really wanted to shoot someone right now. "Une and Relena managed to take some of the fangs out of the L2 governor, that bloated opportunist cockroach. But he's formed some kind of clique in the senate that's been applying internal pressure, and you know how they just love to take the Preventers down a rung or two, especially around budget time. But they haven't heard about the arrests yet. We've been charging people all over the colonies - some pretty high-up too - working from the information you sent us before you went under deep cover. And now we have the head of the whole thing in holding cell One. Morgenstern, right? The whole thing is going to come out, and Internal affairs can sit on it and spin, you'll be a hero-"

"No!" Wufei said quickly, glancing at Sally and then at Trowa in alarm. "Keep me out of Morgenstern's trial. Don't link our two names in any way."

Sally gave him a Look. She knew exactly why he'd said that. Wufei would make a very unreliable arrest officer, and any evidence from him could easily be compromised by a clever lawyer. Sally knew that Wufei was risking his future so that the Morgenstern conviction had a chance of going
through. Agent Po might see the logic behind this, so she didn't say anything, but she had the same
look in her eyes as Duo had when he'd said 'Always for the greater good...'

Heero crossed his arms over his chest and looked at Wufei through his bangs. For Heero, the greater
good was never in any doubt. "We've found other ways to get this man convicted. Ways that do not
involve any of your stay in Freeport. We have some evidence against Morgenstern that we've
gathered, and Quatre thinks there's more now that we know what we're looking for."

"Mr. Winner's board of directors must be very angry at these damned revolutionaries for dragging
their CEO away from his desk," Wufei said with a smile. He hoped he'd get to see Quatre between
here and the stockade.

Heero made a curt gesture that sent all of Quatre's board of directors to hell, and continued speaking
in his monotone. "We have been trying to keep your name out of the evidence files, but you know
this Morgenstern's lawyers will probably call you in as a witness."

"A hostile witness," Wufei grumbled, rubbing his forehead until the skin ached. "Just do me a favor
when you arrest me, Yuy, and don't put me and Morgenstern in the same cell. The man talks too
much. I'd gag him before we hit the embargo lines and he'd call it Preventer brutality."

Heero was of course correct. Morgenstern didn't care about winning or losing his eventual trial. He
just wanted to create a scandal that would shake the Peacecraft democracy to its foundations. He
wanted Space to wonder if the price of peace with Earth had been too high. If he couldn't do it with
weapons and war, he'd do it in courts and using the media. Wufei didn't think he'd succeed, not
when people preferred the latest variety show to the news, but Morgenstern would try. That attempt
would drag Wufei down in his wake. What a beautiful piece of anti-PR. One of the notorious
Gundam Pilots, working for the Preventers. A violent hothead with multiple reprimands, protected
by the Establishment who needed their strong-armed tactics...oh, Wufei could see the headlines
already...

He just hoped that Une would pull her usual magic and make him disappear again, even if it would
be in the stockade for a few months. Morgenstern knew who he was, and so did Morgenstern's allies
in politics and the business world...even in the higher ranks of the Preventers. But that didn't mean
they'd be able to prove that the agent who'd been on Freeport was really Chang Wufei, ex-Pilot.
Hopefully. But it was still going to take a lot of doing.

"Sorry, Barton. I really blew it this time," Wufei said tiredly.

"How?!” Sally snapped, making echoes chime around the metal hull. "By stopping a revolution
before it could drag us all into an Earth/Space war? Correct me if I'm wrong, but isn't that our job?
Barton, say something!"

Trowa had yet to open his mouth, and now his silence was getting strange. Wufei tried to meet his
gaze, gauge how much his old friend was furious at him. But Trowa wasn't even looking at him, he
was staring over Wufei's shoulder. Puzzled, the latter glanced around, but there was nothing there;
just the gleaming steel corridor leading out of the inner bay, the open airlock at the end of it....

Wufei felt as if the air inside the bay had become thinner, making his lungs labor and his head spin.

"This is all ridiculous," Sally was saying firmly. "You should be getting a medal, not an enquiry. We
were talking it over on the way here, Wufei. Une refused to make any promises, but the three of us
will make them in her stead. We will not see you badgered over this. I guess we can't make it all
disappear this time, but we always have that option we discussed before: putting you through the
witness protection program as a smoke screen and making you vanish. You could rejoin another unit
with a brand-new past - I mean, look at you, you're only twenty, the age most people are first hired into the Preventers. Then we can move you back into our unit once we shuffle some personnel around. Give us six months. A year, tops, and this Morgenstern will be fighting for his sorry hide in the courts in Luxemburg and you'll be back where you belong. Then we can forget all this idiocy and things can get back to normal."

Her well-meaning words sent a chill through Wufei. Back to normal? Back to being Peacecraft’s running dog? Or even just a normal Preventer, working on some crimes and ignoring the greater ones right outside the door because it wasn't politically feasible to address them yet...? Wufei was quite aware that, if Morgenstern and his allies managed to snare him, he could spend the next decade in jail. Yet returning to defend a peace that was slowly crushing something inside of him, inch by inch, wasn't any more attractive.

But that had always been his path. His duty. He'd accepted all the consequences years ago. He no longer had a choice.

Wufei stared at the open airlock and thought, strangely enough, of Carver. He never had learned the man's name. Maybe he could ask Morgenstern, if they ever had the mutual misfortune of sharing the same cell.

He remembered Carver picking up that meat hook like a soulless automaton, because the unnamed Blade knew only how to follow the road he’d chosen, unable to look aside and see the choices that might still be there. Choices were, after all, terrifying. They could lead to mistakes. That was the price of freedom.

There was freedom outside that airlock, and Duo, and a lot of trouble, and Duo, and some really hard choices to make. And Duo.

Wufei looked back at Trowa. "I have never sought to escape from the consequences of my actions." It was his voice, yet it sounded like someone else speaking those words.

"No," Trowa answered, face unreadable as he finally met Wufei's eyes, "you never take the easy way out. Where there's a battle to be fought, you're there. Even if you have to go looking for one."

Wufei frowned, unsure of what that might mean.

"That's a very unpopular attitude these days," Trowa added. "Our society has no more room for unbending fools who can only fight for justice without compromise."

"Barton!" Sally said, scandalized.

Okay, okay, I get it, Wufei thought, a strange smile twisting his face. "What about the two Preventers who saw me come in?"

Just like that, the choice was made. Well, well, well...he and Carver really were different in the end.

"Mandelson and Himura? What about them?" Trowa said calmly. "We're still in Freeport space. The leaders of this colony were very exact in their conditions when they permitted us to dock. We're not even allowed to arrest Morgenstern until we reach the embargo lines, and we've not been given authority to restrain anybody."

"Ah."

"Wufei, if you do this, we won't be able to defend you. You'll be outlawed." Sally was looking at the airlock too, voice tight and urgent. Wufei had the intuition that Trowa must have discussed this
potential 'solution' with Heero and Sally beforehand, alongside talk of lawyers and relocation programs, which was why Sally had been arguing so fiercely for the other options before Wufei had even had time to sit down, put his feet up and get himself arrested.

Yes, if he walked away now, he'd be sunk for good. But that would make the Morgenstern trial so much easier to handle, without the potential embarrassment of Preventer Chang Wufei being dragged in as a witness by either side.

Wufei glanced at Heero, his friend and partner. The blue eyes studied him, calm and controlled.

"This solution has many advantages," Heero said. "Sooner or later, you were going to end up in the stockade for a long stretch. This way, you will always be active and available to us if we need you."

Sally made a small noise of exasperation and rubbed the bridge of her nose, obviously not pleased with Heero for his perfectly logical argument. Wufei smiled crookedly. Heero was the Preventer's poster boy, but that was only the picture that Relena and Trowa had painted of him. The real Heero would consider any means justified as long as he could remain a weapon ready to fight for Peace; even moving outside of the law to do so.

"Agent Chang." Trowa's voice became officious and deliberate. "We request that you accompany us outside Freeport territorial space at this time. If you do not comply, you will be suspended from the force pending enquiry. Criminal charges are likely to follow. I wouldn't be counting on a pension either, if I were you."

"It wouldn't have amounted to much anyway."

Trowa smiled, a bare lift of the corners of his mouth as he stuck out his hand. "Good luck," he said calmly. "Take care of yourself, and get back in touch with us in a few months when things have calmed down. Use our private drop-box and codes."

"Why? So you can get my help dealing with Preventer issues inside of Freeport?" Wufei asked sardonically, his hand firm in Trowa's.

"So we know you're all right," Trowa said softly...but then it was Captain Barton speaking again. "I'm not putting you out on a permanent holiday here. We'll need you again. Every person in this room was at one point or the other on the wrong side of the law so that they could do what was right. I expect you to be available to do the same in the coming years. I know I'm sending you into an environment where your sword won't get rusty from too many compromises," Trowa added, releasing his hand.

Wufei examined him, intrigued by those last words. Had Trowa guessed the extent of the damage that the last few years had done to Wufei's soul? Wufei was curious, but he no longer had the luxury of discussing it with his friend. One door opening closed others. He turned instead to Heero, who stuck out his hand.

"I'm sorry to lose you, Chang," Heero said, with all the emotion of a computer readout. "You were the best partner I could hope to have."

"Same," Wufei answered, wondering if he'd ever shaken Heero's hand before...

Heero made to move away. Wufei gripped the strong, scarred hand in both of his, moving his injured arm in the sling to do so despite the sudden twinge up and down his left side.

"Partners and friends," he said stiffly. "I'm worried about you, Yuy. So is Duo. The war is over. We are no longer required to be weapons. I...hope you realize that soon. It won't be safe for you in
Freeport, but maybe Duo and I can meet up with you somewhere. If you want to talk one day."

Heero stared at him as if Wufei had gone clinically insane, and maybe he had. Wufei really wished Duo could have been here for this, because the smuggler would have been able to phrase that much better. But Wufei had managed to say it, even though it violated every line they'd drawn between them, and he was glad of it.

Heero detached his hand carefully from Wufei's without a comment. Wufei caught a strange smile from Trowa over Heero's shoulder... Then he had an armful of Sally to contend with as she gave him a careful hug.

"That injury looks serious, get it taken care of," she said sternly. "If I had the time, I'd haul you into the medical bay, but we have to get out of Freeport airspace in the next hour. I hope they know what they're doing on this tin can's hospital. They do have a regen unit here, right?"

"I'll check," Wufei said evasively.

Sally's eyes on him were troubled. "I hope you'll be safe here. Trowa said you should be, but if you have any doubts, get out on Seythe and to the Preventer ship Allouette on the embargo line. Talk to Captain Nilu. He's from my old unit and he has a direct line to me. He'll have to arrest you, but he'll make sure you're safe and that the first person you talk to is one of Quatre's lawyers and the next person you talk to after that is me. Okay? You can change your mind. We have options."

"Thanks, Sally." Wufei didn't think he'd ever want those options, but he was not going to scorn someone who was giving him a choice, especially out of friendship. He returned her hug as well he could with one arm, propriety and personal space be damned. He would miss her. He would miss them all.

The Euclid's rockets puffed frozen mix into the icy oblivion of space, maneuvering the sloop out of its berth and into the space lanes. Duo stood at the view port, watching its departure. Since he thought he was alone, his expression was unguarded. Wufei noted the fatigue etched deep onto Duo's features, as well as traces of physical pain the smuggler had hid until now, and something like sadness blended with fatalistic resignation. The look didn't suit him.

Then he caught sight of Wufei in the star port's reflection.

Duo spun around, and Wufei was treated to the rare sight of a totally astounded Maxwell. For all of three seconds, and then the smuggler recovered and rubbed his forehead in his 'oh my god I am surrounded by idiots' pose.

"Wu, I got to tell you, this is not the smartest decision you ever made."

That was probably the case, but if Duo really thought so, then why couldn't he seem to stop smiling?

"I'll have a few people who'll want to stick a knife in my back, but that's nothing new," Wufei said sarcastically.

Duo wandered up to him, grinning like a loon. "Aaaaah, no sweat. It'll take some fancy footwork, but we'll manage. We'll take in any refugee in Freeport! Um, you did cut the ties, right?"
popping over to the Red Band over there and saying 'Hi, I'm a Preventer-'

Wufei reached into his pocket. Every muscle was sore and abused, his head was spinning as if he could feel Freeport's rotation in his inner ear, yet he felt oddly calm for someone who'd just thrown his former life away.

He took out a slightly rumpled and folded piece of medical script with a scribbled note on the back. "I have a paper here," he said, unfolding it one-handed, "from a Freeport Elder no less, that says that I am leaving now of my own free will and with the approval of Freeport, to deal with some matters Outside. It certifies that I am not being expelled, that I have committed no crimes against Freeport, and that I am a probationary citizen with three months of quarantine accomplished already. If I wish to return, those will be counted against my total." Only nine more to go, then.

Duo snatched Braun's paper from his hands and started reading it in an astonished mumble.

Wufei rubbed his eyes with his freed fingers. Outside the view port, the Euclid was a metallic blob the size of a raised fist. Wufei glanced down and after a couple of tries he managed to focus on the numbers on his watch. "If that's not enough, there will be a warrant out for my arrest in roughly two hours. Will that be an adequate introduction?"

Duo looked up sharply. "Warrant? Man, they don't dick around out there. What the hell is that about?"

Wufei took a deep breath- and released it with a shake of his head. "There are circumstances. They no longer matter."

Duo chewed his inner lip for a couple of seconds, and then he carefully folded up Braun's paper and put it into Wufei's good hand. "No, I guess they don't. Come on," he added, an arm slipping around Wufei's shoulder. "Let's go home."
Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I build no system. I ask an end to privilege, the abolition of slavery, equality of rights, and the reign of law. Justice, nothing else. That is the alpha and omega of my argument."

---Pierre-Joseph Proudhon

Part 35

"Yuck. This looks like the mother of all ugly. It's time for that trip to the clinic."

"It's fine," Wufei grunted with barely a glance at the hideous black and blue mess that was his upper left arm. "It's getting better. The swelling's gone down, there's no sign of infection. It'll heal."

"Yeah, it'll heal and leave a hole the size of my fist in your muscle, Chang," Duo grumbled, but he grabbed the bandages and applied a fresh dressing without insisting further. The exchange had become something of a daily ritual between them.

Wufei was willing to concede that the damage would be a bit more permanent now without that regen unit and proper surgery. He'd always be a bit weaker in that arm, though a strenuous training regimen would compensate for the injury. But he didn't think the Freeport clinic could do much more for him, and he refused to monopolize the time of the overworked medical staff who still had their hands full with the injured, three days after the internal strife had finally died down.

Duo's field dressing in place, Wufei carefully pulled on his shirt and top, with that faint prickle of strangeness he felt every time he dressed. Duo had gotten him some new clothes from the commissary, to replace those that had been ripped and bloodied by the Breakers. Wufei was now wearing the traditional grey woolly jumper, crafted by the army of volunteers seen in groups at every street corner, park or window, applying knitting needles for the good of Freeport and to keep its citizens clothed.

Wufei would have worn this without a second thought a week ago. But now, when he pulled on the jumper or his leather jacket, it seemed to bring home the knowledge that this was his clothing from now on. He would never wear a Preventer uniform again. Before, the attire had been part of a disguise. Now, they were his clothes, the ones he'd probably be sent to Recyc in, whether that happened in a few decades or tomorrow.

Wufei did not feel resentment or regret as he smoothed down the coarse wool. It was more a surge of bewilderment at how radically his life had changed three days ago. For some reason, the big truths resulting from his choice were easier to get used to than the oddness of the little details.

"Okay, take a nap. I'll be back in a few hours." Duo washed his hands at the sink, then pulled on his prosthetic glove and long coat. "Or meditate, or read, or play a shoot-em-up on my laptop one-handed if that's your thing, but absolutely no physical effort that could bust those stitches. It looks
bad enough as it is."

"Yes, mother."

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph, just try to take care of this guy and this is the thanks you get," Duo said with the kind of over-the-top theatrics that, along with his roguish charm, would land him a job on any daytime soap opera he'd care to audition for. "Gotta go. Be back in two hours, tops. See ya soon, handsome!"

"Watch your back," Wufei grumbled at the door, wishing he could go too. But it was still too dangerous for one Chang Wufei, ex-Preventer, to go wandering around the streets of Freeport. In his opinion, it was too dangerous for Duo as well, but the smuggler would hear none of that. He'd pointed out that one of them had to get around and manage the fall-out. Or was Wufei suggesting they both stay holed up in their room for a couple of months, eating Babka's cooking, washing in the sink and pretending no-one was home? When Wufei had said that sounded like a workable plan, Duo had declared he'd rather go down fighting than die of sodium and cooked cabbage overdose, and that had been that.

Wufei looked at the bed. He could use a nap. He wasn't sleeping all that well...But he had to get out of here. Three days locked in Duo's single room, or the junkyard outside, was driving him stir crazy.

Ten rather painful minutes later, Wufei was sitting on the roof of their building, watching Makhno spreading out at his feet. His sector. Everybody in Freeport was identified by the sector they lived in, and so was Wufei now. Just one more of those little details that brought home to him how much his life had changed when he'd walked out that airlock three days ago.

They'd come clean to their friends in Makhno shortly after they'd returned back to the sector from Bay 49. Duo wanted to make sure Wufei would be safe here, and for that they had to be able to count on their friends, if they still could. Duo had gathered the people from his building, his pals and work-partners, a few notables of the sector, and then others had shown up out of curiosity in the Commissary cafeteria, the only place in Makhno where a meeting of that size could be held.

It had been, incidentally, one of the hardest things Wufei had done in his life, to stand before honest people who'd believed in him and admit that his whole existence here had been a lie. Duo had done the talking, of course, since Wufei was still officially his Blade - or rather, like the clothes, the disguise was now truly his identity. It must have been even harder for Duo. But like Braun, the smuggler must have known his deals with the Preventers might come to light one day, and would have already thought through and accepted the consequences before he'd even started.

The revelation didn't go as Wufei expected. People were angry, of course. But most of the long discussion that followed over bad coffee and worse sandwiches provided by the commissary, was how bad this was going to look in the other sectors. Friends and strangers would question their judgment and the integrity of Makhno once this was known. There was a certain air of having passively participated in Wufei's infiltration here; a serious loss of face in Freeport.

They weren't happy, but nobody asked the two men to leave the sector.

In retrospect, using his knowledge of Freeport, Wufei could see this through their eyes. He'd stood before them with a bloodied bandage on his arm, still dirty and bruised, face pale and worn with pain and growing exhaustion. More like a harried refugee than a Preventer. They also knew why he was looking like that. By now everyone knew, either first hand or by account, of his fight with Carver. Though Wufei's contribution to ending the Breakers hadn't been as crucial or far-reaching as Ravachol's and Duo's, it had been spectacular and it was obvious it had nearly cost him his life.
Duo had played up Wufei's past, weighing Wufei's history as a Preventer against his record as a Gundam Pilot. That had a certain crazy cachet in this place. And of course, to top it all off, Wufei really was a refugee now. He had chosen Freeport over the Outside, and had been outlawed for it. That made him 'one of us' automatically, whatever his past. Wufei caught Marci, Ivanova and a few of the other younger female citizens looking at him with wide, admiring eyes as if they thought this was all rather romantic, instead of the result of some sordid politics and a desperate choice.

It had been Babka's reaction which summed it up best. She'd been very quiet while listening to Duo. Wufei had realized that even if the consensus let him stay in Makhno, he'd have to move out if Babka didn't forgive him, even if he had to spend the rest of his quarantine slaving in a mining satellite as a result.

Finally, while people were still loudly arguing, Babka had stood up, walked over and patted him on the good arm.

"You were very young when you joined Them, and I am well placed to know that young men make some very stupid mistakes. I've had enough sons to learn that," she'd said (it took Wufei a second to realize she'd just described his entire Preventer career as some kind of growing pain, best forgotten). "But of course an upstanding young man such as yourself would choose Freedom over Tyranny," Babka had sniffed. "What stupid people, to have sent you here. I am in no way surprised you stayed. I forgive you - and that scamp Duo - for the lies. I think it was for what you both thought was a good cause. If you hadn't been here..." Babka had broken off at that point, looking upset.

Wufei and Duo hadn't actually tracked down the Breakers single-handedly; it would be fairer to say they'd been the hapless triggers for a succession of events that led to Morgenstern's downfall. Nonetheless, Wufei's presence here had been the necessary catalyst for that succession of events. If he and Duo hadn't infiltrated Freeport, hadn't dug around, hadn't alarmed Morgenstern and awakened Ravachol's curiosity, then Morgenstern would have had time to complete his plans, start a real revolution in Space, and convert enough key people to his cause to drag Freeport down into the abyss.

Babka truly believed in her version of anarchy and in Freeport's self-regulation. Acknowledging the necessity of Wufei's presence here - the necessity for rat-catchers in general, perhaps - was a sign this belief had sprung a leak. Wufei had been willing to risk his life to bring down Morgenstern because that was his duty, his battle. But he only really hated the man when he saw the brief wounded look in an elderly lady's eyes.

Then Babka had shaken herself and looked at him severely. "Become a good citizen. Make us proud." And then she'd walked out, back straight, and gone home. Yesterday Duo had found a pot full of borsht on the front step. Two portions. Said it all, really.

Wufei now had a place to live. That just left him with the next big question about his future...His self-imposed confinement came in handy at that point. He had many long hours to meditate, or stare at the ceiling as he lay next to Duo, arm aching too much to sleep. Duo, true to form, called him 'a grouch' and then carried on as if he hadn't noticed Wufei's lack of response to his comments and questions and muttered imprecations against a reluctant rotor that refused to let him fix it, leaving Wufei time and space to think.

Time gave Wufei an opportunity to explore his beliefs and motivations, now stripped from the clutter of duty and necessity. His obligations had deserted him. The Peace would have to get on without him now. He was staring his freedom in the face and trying to figure out which of many choices he should make, guided, for once, only by what he had inside. For someone who'd been driven by familial duty, revenge, obligations or his own pride for his entire life, the trip of self-discovery had
not been a comfortable one.

And now, armed with that knowledge, he had to make a choice. A lot of choices, but one in particular, and he wasn't all that happy with it. Wufei had the chance to start with a clean slate, to find his own faith in the future and truly respect it, and if he didn't follow it now - whatever the cost - he would never be whole. But the cost of this choice was bigger than giving up his career. This choice could cost him Duo.

That had been something else he'd found within himself during these three days of self-examination. How much room Duo had now taken up in his soul. For someone who'd been a loner all his life, that discovery had been disturbing. It went further than that TV-drama emotion called 'love', which Wufei had never been sure he fully understood. It went way further than sex, which was pretty much where all his other relationships had started and ended. His feelings for Duo started in bewildered and grudging respect. In the pleasure of having that respect returned in kind. In mutual trust. In finding someone who was his dark and twisted mirror, who knew the joys of battle, the cutting-edge necessity of choices, the wild, frightening breadth of freedom. Wufei had found an aspect of himself in Duo, a part Wufei himself had not recognized until now. Yet they were very different too, in mesmerizing, sometimes annoying or antagonistic but ultimately fascinating ways that drew him in like the paths of a maze.

Whether they remained lovers - once Wufei's body was healed enough to even think about stuff like that - or went back to being friends and comrades, Duo was now a part of his life in a way nobody had ever been before. At least nobody living. Wufei was astounded and almost affronted that something so important, a change so fundamental, had happened over the months and he hadn't even noticed it until now.

But now his choice could cost him that. Duo might not want to remain his friend; might not, in fact, be able to afford to.

Wufei had known from the start that choices were painful. Some choices were almost impossible to make. It was what pushed men to take Carver's path. Blind obedience in a cause was easier. But Wufei was not so weak or so brittle. He'd make his choice with his eyes open, like Duo and Braun had when they'd let Wufei infiltrate this place, and incidentally find his path.

And the time was now. He'd made up his mind a couple of days ago. He'd just been putting details together in his head. And putting it off. But he wasn't a coward. He had to accept the consequences of his choice. And now was as good a time as any, up here on the roof with Duo standing over him, fuming.

"Chang, which part of 'no physical effort' did you not get?"

"I can climb a ladder with two legs and a good arm," Wufei said, with a dismissive half-shrug.

"Several stories worth? If you had the sense God gave a sparrow, you would.-"

"Duo, I've been thinking. We need to talk."

There was a heavy silence behind him, and then Duo sat down next to him on the parapet without further ranting.

"Yeah, I gathered we'd have to think about the future at some point," Duo said. "It's not like you can stay my Blade forever. I mean, in theory you can, but that's just not your style. The collar looks cute on you and all, but I don't see you wearing it when you're old and grey. And of course the reason I'd need a Blade is to watch my back while I smuggle or do Scissorman stuff, and I'm not dumb enough
to think you'd go for that. I know you'd never be a smuggler or break the law, even if the Johnny Lawboys put you on their Wanted posters out there."

Wufei nodded.

Duo spoke quickly, staring out over the darkness of Makhno around them. "I know grease monkey's a bit of a come-down for you, but you know, I've been busy these past three days. I started talking to people, just a bit. Putting out feelers. I've been chatting to the folk who can get you work on the deep space explorers. How would that grab you? Was that what you were thinking of?"

"No. But it's a good idea, thank you," Wufei answered honestly.

Duo kicked his heels into the parapet, almost bashful, as much as Duo Maxwell could approach such an unlikely emotion. "Yeah, I remembered the look on your face three months ago, when we went through the shipyards. And that time in the Lunar prison, when you talked about deep space. I think that'd be something you could really get into. You certainly have the mechanical chops for it. Oh man, they'd drool all over you. They're always looking for space-savvy personnel who can use a construction mecha. And the mechs who work on those deep-space beauties might be the ones selected to crew them when they leave, in AC 210 or whenever they're ready. Well, that might not be possible, but just working on them..."

"That'd be something," Wufei agreed, eyes on the darkened sector ceiling above their heads, faint warning lights twinkling like distant stars. "I think I would like that. Not full time, but helping out on those shipyards could be my second job, since everybody in this joint has more than one and I can't knit worth a damn."

Duo didn't laugh at Wufei's lame attempt at lightening the mood. He bit his lip and scowled.

"Wufei, I think I know what you're hoping your main job will be, and I have to tell you, it's not going to be possible, even if it would be right down your alley."

Wufei looked at him interrogatingly.

"Even I can't be a rat-catcher anymore," Duo said, frowning at the buildings boxing them in. "And I'm not liking it, but that's the way it goes. Rat-catchers are the guardrails of this place. The shit-stirrers who do the stupid, unpopular dangerous job that gets you into loads of fights. It's gotta be the perfect-fit job for an ex-Gundam Pilot, I grant ya...but I'm gonna be known far and wide now as the rat-catcher who brought down the Breakers."

Wufei was very conscious of this. It was why he was glad to remain Duo's Blade for as long as he could, for as long as Duo would let him. Freeport was still reeling from the disorder that had shaken the colony. But the full truth and the damning details, or some twisted, rumor-laden version of such, were seeping out into the populace. When people finally came to terms with it all and started looking for answers, Wufei expected to have a lot of fights on his hands, protecting his friend's back from those knives that might want to find a home there.

"And there's even less chance you can make it as a ratter." Duo snorted with laughter, a sound without much humor in it. "Ex-Pilots like us don't tend to think about the future further than next Tuesday, but chances are you'll still be in this tin can in ten years' time, maybe more. And you know what? They'll still be calling you 'The Preventer' behind your back, down in Bakunin and in Mooncurse and other less reputable sectors. People'll accept you if you work hard and integrate, but if you ask a question, discreet-like, like a rat-catcher does, they'll see you coming a mile away. That...well, it just wouldn't work. You see that, right?"
"Yes, you are undoubtedly right. I wasn't thinking of becoming a rat-catcher."

"Oh?" Duo hitched a curious eyebrow in Wufei's direction. "So, what job were you thinking of?"

"Cop."

Duo stared at him for a long, frozen minute, then he hunched himself into a knot on the parapet with his head sunk in his hands and clutched his bangs.

"Whaaat?" he groaned, then he lifted his head and barked: "There's no such thing as a c- as that in Freeport!"

"There will be," Wufei stated, staring out into the eternal night. "It will take years, probably, but-

"Are you out of your mind?!"

"I."

"Hello! Anarchy! We don't have cops!"

"Anarchy? You told me once that Freeport has no system, not even anarchy. It's built on the needs of survival and what people make of their lives, and this non-system changes and evolves with each new migrant."

"It don't change that fucking much!" Duo was clutching his bangs again.

"Of course I don't mean a cop as in a representative of a higher authority," Wufei told him tiredly. "I don't mean a cop at all, since Freeport doesn't have that kind of judicial structure. But that's what they'll be saying behind my back in Bakunin and Mooncurse, and probably elsewhere as well. 'The Preventer' might actually be a step up from that, but I bet they'll be calling me 'The Cop', or a lot worse."

The only answer he got was a plaintive whine.

"It's what I want to do," Wufei explained, his words already rehearsed over the last two days. He'd expected this reaction. "It's what I have to do. Justice was the fundamental tenet of my clan. Maybe I should move beyond that concept imposed to me in my youth. But I have chosen not to. It's changed from what I initially believed in at the start of the war. It'd been forced to evolve when he'd met Treize, when he'd found out that Justice was hardly as simple a notion as he'd held as a child. "My Justice has learned to compromise, to wait, to measure. I want to work with it now, without the trappings imposed by others. I want to make it truly my own and live by it."

"Die by it," Duo growled into his hands.

"Maybe. If that's where it leads me."

Another groan was his only answer.

"But I think I'm needed here," Wufei added.

"No you're not." Duo's voice was muffled and grumpy.

"Really? Tell that to Lesley Spasson. To Marta Bernstein. To Elder Braun."

Duo lifted his face from his hands and studied Wufei's expression. After a pause, he folded his arms over his chest and appeared ready to listen at least.
"There's something missing on this colony, Duo. It's clarity. There's no justice here, only revenge, and that's if you're lucky. Freeport works on rumors and evaluations of character and a hundred different degrees of honor, connections and saving face. My reason tells me this shouldn't work as well as it does, yet it actually spins along fairly well. But when someone close to you is lying dead in Recyc, murdered, that's not good enough. Not knowing why, not having justice...it kills you inside. I've worked with enough bereaved families these past five years to know that. Justice is not revenge, it's exposing the mechanics of a crime as well as bringing the perpetrators to answer for it. The victims need to know why, to understand why this happened to them, and so does everyone in their society.

"I want to be a tool for that justice. It's going to require a lot of groundwork, I know. I'll have to start by persuading the Elders and the Red Bands, since I'll need some cooperation from Freeport's infrastructure. But I won't be acting on the behalf of authority, and they won't be the ones to call on me. It will be the victims, or their friends and families. If they want someone who has experience reading a crime scene, who can outthink a criminal - a criminal by Freeport standards, a murderer, someone who broke the inner rules and will not come clean about it - they'll be able to call upon me."

"And what the hell will you do?" Duo challenged.

"Basic forensics, since that's virtually nonexistent here. Fingerprints, if I can persuade the Elders that this would help- maybe too unpopular to start with, but I can still determine a lot from the scene, and then ask questions-"

Duo made an exasperated noise. "You can't interrogate people. Who will answer you?"

"Those who want justice. Who have nothing to hide."

Duo was silent at that. The cunning that lurked behind the easy-going façade was seizing upon Wufei's full meaning now, weighing his words and the intent behind them. Duo had been there when Braun had had no other choice but to call in an undercover cop to find out what had happened to Joshua Brindlow. He'd seen the pain in Lesley's eyes, the mourning in Marta's. He knew what Wufei was talking about.

If Wufei could do this, if he could insert himself into Freeport society, then he'd become a part of the colony's self-regulation, like the Elders and the rat-catchers and the people who witnessed fights. Victims could choose to come to him, or not. The ones he questioned could choose to answer him, or not. But if they didn't talk to him, their friends might wonder what they were hiding. Popular pressure was what kept a lot of people honest in Freeport, and if Wufei could become an instrument of that pressure...of course, people could lie to him, and probably would if they had something to hide. But a good citizen of Freeport could tell lies from truth, especially one with Wufei's previous experience, and then the lie would be very informative.

"So..." Duo said, after almost five minutes of silence. "It's not really like a cop at all. More like a detective. A PI." He rolled the words around his mouth as if tasting them for possibilities.

"They can call me what they want," Wufei said with a shrug, his injury underlining the movement with a twinge. "They can see me as a rat-catcher who works openly instead of ferreting around in the shadows, or an aide to the forensics department who goes just that little bit further into the inquest. I don't care. I'm ready to bet I'll be 'The Cop' if this ever works at all."

"And you'll wear the name with pride," Duo said acidly.

"Yes, I imagine I will."
"You're fucking nuts."

"I probably am."

"This will never work."

"There are strong chances that it won't."

"Will you stop agreeing with me?!" Duo snapped, fists clenched at his sides and bangs and braid almost bristling.

Wufei looked at him with growing surprise. Because this was an aggravated and worried Duo. Not...

"...You're not angry. I thought you'd be furious. I expected you to..." He'd expected Duo to try to stop Wufei a lot more actively, not just bitch about it.

Duo looked at him blankly, and then something quite amazing happened. He blushed, faintly. He glared as Wufei stared at him in disbelief, and then he turned away in a huff, propping an elbow against one knee and his chin in his hand in a 'see if I care' position.

"I guess..." The words slipped out as if he couldn't stop them but didn't feel like acknowledging them for all that. "I guess it's just been a long time since I saw you...I dunno...so determined and sure about something. Enthusiastic, in that cold-fish way of yours. You really want this."

And that was why Duo was the person who was taking up so much room in his soul.

Wufei licked his lips, and the cold, chemical-scented air bit at the trace of humidity as he tried to find the words for what to say next. The hard part. The part he'd never said to anybody before.

"I don't mind gambling my life on this, or risking general censure, but the one thing that bothers me the most is that I-...We both realize that your best move, in nine months time, will be to cut all connections between us and leave me to my own devices, because the stigma that this might carry could really harm you. I...I don't want to lose...a good friend. But it's...I have a choice and I have to accept that this might be a consequence. If I don't choose this, I'll be a shadow of myself. I wouldn't consider myself worthy of you. I'd be losing you either way."

"Oh for fuck's sake," Duo growled. From the sound of it, he'd just slapped his forehead as if he could force some patience into his mental makeup that way, but Wufei kept his eyes fixed on the darkened buildings around them.

"I know this is not fair to you, especially since you have already risked your reputation to keep me safe here, in your sector." Wufei hated how his voice sounded stiff and formal. He'd never made this sort of admission before. He thought Duo would know him well enough to read beyond the stilted words and the awkward unspoken parts. "You see, I don't think that my becoming a smuggler or a mechanic would buy us a real future. Though I would be...almost tempted to try if...But I have made my choice. If you want to sever all ties with me, even send me to quarantine right now instead of keeping me as your Blade, I understand-"

Duo's palm hit the concrete of the parapet an inch from Wufei's leg. "Shut up, Chang. Fuck. You're selfish, you know that?"

That really hurt, because of course, it was true. "Yes, I am."

"You fucking well are. I can't believe you're thinking of cutting me out on the action here."
"I apologize." Wufei rubbed his bandaged arm, to soothe an itch and because the flickers of pain were a welcome distraction. "It's bad repayment for all you've done for me, but-..."

Wait a minute.

Wufei blinked at Makhno's skyline, then he twisted on the parapet to face Duo. He must have misunderstood- he hoped he'd misunderstood!

"What? What did you say? What action? What are you talking about?"

Duo was giving him a fine glare. "What are you talking about? This plan of yours is gonna be huge if it works! And tons of fighting and screwing people over to get it to work. You know the one thing I fear is boredom-"

"No!" Wufei's voice rang like a shot, and it was fortunate that it was the sector's day-cycle because he didn't give a damn right now about disturbing the top-floor neighbors. "You- have you gone out of your mind?!"

"Didn't we have this conversation already?"

"I absolutely, categorically refuse to drag you into-"

"Oy, think I can't cut it?"

"That has nothing to do with it!" Wufei was quite aware he could be heard down into the street now and did not give a damn about it. "What possible reason do you have to take such a risk?!"

"Oh, it's not for your beautiful black eyes, if that's what's worrying you."

Wufei was silent, breath rattling in his throat as he re-evaluated Duo's intent.

"You're not thinking, Chang," Duo sniffed, his eyes flashing with his own short temper. "Why'd you think I became a rat-catcher in the first place? Why d'you think I let Preventers onto Freeport? For the money?"

"...No. I knew it wasn't for the money," Wufei had to admit in a mutter.

"Fuckin' 10-10 on that. Though I like being able to keep Scythe afloat...hmmm." Duo rubbed his chin, eyes calculating as they contemplated a clothesline strung across a roof on the other side of the street. "I'm gonna break Monique Desjean's heart, if she has one. Hmf, you might be boning up on your forensic skills using my dead carcass as an example when she finds out I have to give up on a lot of the grease monkey stuff. But I'm gonna have to fly freetrading more often. I'll need the dough, and we'll need to get more contacts on the Outside, now that the Preventer backdoor is mostly closed to us. As much as people hate it, Freeport and Outside are as connected as Recyc and the water in the faucet. A lot of the crimes in Freeport are born from the rot in the scum-ends of Space. We'll need our sources if we want to get anywhere. Don't give me that look," he added, "I won't involve you in the trade. I know your bright, shiny principles won't stoop to smuggling. On a practical side, you shouldn't set foot outside of Freeport for another ten years, at the least. You are outlawed and a runaway Preventer and all that."

That hadn't been why Wufei had been looking at his friend with a searching expression.

"Duo, are you sure?"

"No," Duo answered straight away, without his mask of breezy self-confidence. "It's a bit too soon
to be sure. I gotta think about this long and hard...I won't claim to do it for the same reasons you are. I don't give a rat's arse about Justice. You know that. But this is my turf, and I defend it. If I can't be a rat-catcher...then maybe you hit upon the next best thing. I'll think about it. It just struck me, listening to you talk about it, that even if we'll be the most unpopular bruisers onboard, it won't be a bad thing we're doing. Huh, just like old times, hmm?" Duo grinned at him, and despite all the worried thoughts going through his mind, Wufei couldn't help but answer in kind.

"And if I'm there to help, you'll have the rat-catcher network behind you," Duo added, making a gun sign with his fingers and aiming it at Wufei. "That is a considerable power, my friend. A lot of them will be happy to have someone who can do the footwork openly. Who can talk to the Elders, follow leads up front and shame a close-mouthed spacer into talking. Someone who can just run a fucking simple test to see if a guy was poisoned or strangled or whatnot or if he just died from too much bad booze in a hooch parlor. Yeah," Duo added, looking away, face suddenly serious. "Maybe you're right, Chang...maybe there's a hole here waiting to be filled."

Then Duo's contemplative expression was replaced by a lunatic grin.

"Or maybe we'll be Enemy Number One in short order. But either way, it won't be boring!"

"Duo-"

"Plus, this way we can continue wearing out the mattress springs together without having to sneak around to do it."

Wufei's mouth stayed open around his next objection. "You still-..."

"Idiot," Duo growled, a propos of nothing that had been spoken out loud. He reached out, grabbed Wufei by the grey woolly jumper and dragged him into a kiss, nearly unbalancing them both off the parapet and down onto the roof.

Wufei felt breathless. Lighter caresses brushed his lips, and at the back of his mind, a little voice speculated about his present level of fitness and if he wasn't recovered enough for- but Chang Wufei was made of sterner stuff and wasn't that easily distracted. He leaned back and violently shook his head to clear it.

"Think about this, Duo," he said harshly.

"I will!" The answer was accompanied by a saucy grin. Then he looped his arm around Wufei's shoulder and pulled them together, taking care not to put pressure on Wufei's injured arm. "We've got nine months. I'll think about it, I promise. You think about it too. The details, I mean, and how you'll ram this down everybody's throats. I'm not asking you to think about giving up on your idea, because I know you wouldn't change your mind if God himself came down into this dead-end colony and told you to, you stubborn son of a bitch."

"You're probably right. Of course, if I'm a stubborn son of a bitch, what does that make you?" The riposte was weak. Wufei felt dazed as he watched his future violently change once more, leaving yet more choices and consequences ahead for both of them. It was scary to think he'd have a partner on this insane trip. It was also inspiring and heartwarming to know he wouldn't be walking alone.

"Me? I'm a daring son of Space," Duo quipped.

"An adrenaline junky. You know I'll spend the next nine months trying to talk you out of this, right?"

"Good luck with that. I am an ex-Gundam pilot, after all. You know what that means!"
"That you're a suicidal moron."

"Love you too."

They stayed side by side on the roof for another hour, watching Freeport's darkness and blinking lights spread out before them. Then it got too cold, so they went back down again to talk over the details some more.

Chapter End Notes

This is the end...beautiful friend, the end... - no, wait, that's too depressing.

This is the end of the world as we know it! And I feel fiiiiiiiiine!

Thank you everyone for all the comments, art, podcast (thanks Opalsong!) and enthusiasm for this fic over the years. Freeport is by far my most complex and developed fic, and probably the one I am most proud of in term of storyline and construction. I hope you all enjoyed it, whether it was a first read or a re-read, and that you had fun buming around with me in Freeport's cold, dry and dirty alleyways.

Works inspired by this one: Freeport [PODFIC] by Opalsong, Mission to Draw Hot Wufei a Million Times (illustrations) by szzzt

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!